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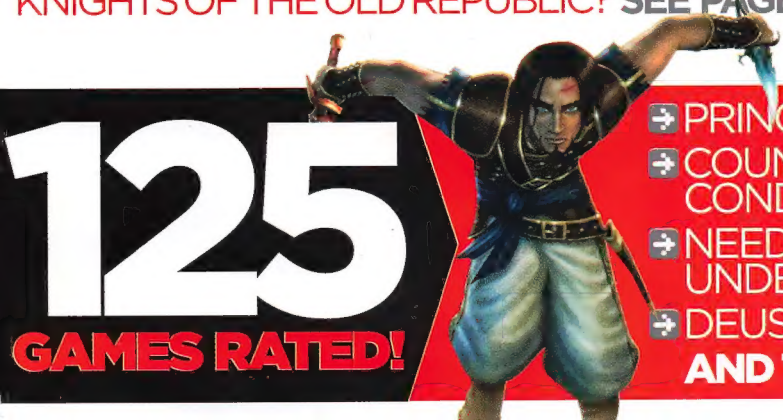
WE PICK THE BEST OF THE BEST

IS IT CALL OF DUTY? PRINCE OF PERSIA? MADDEN? KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC? SEE PAGE 57



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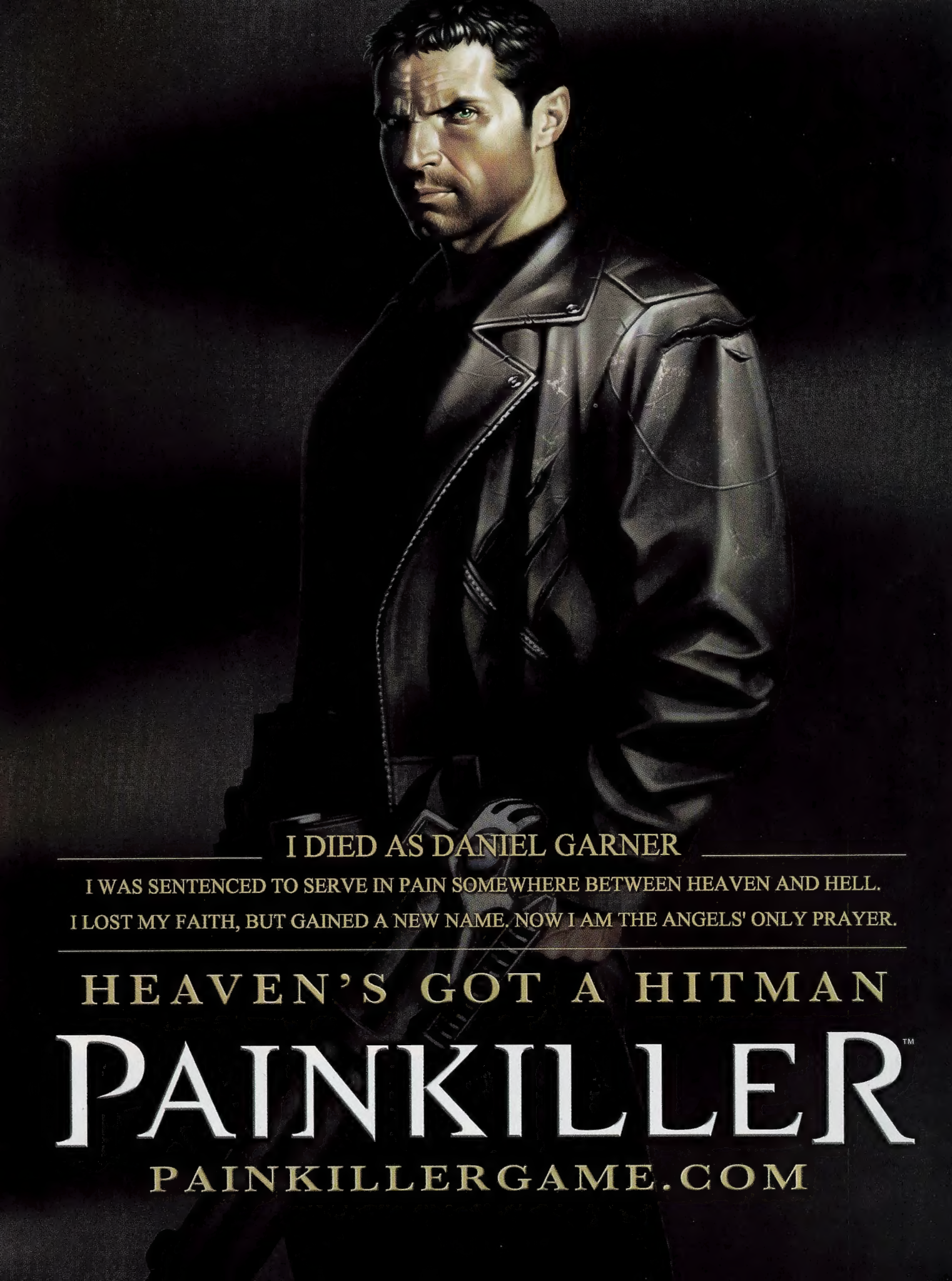
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In 2004, there were more good games than you could shake our intern at.

16 Letters
Some people like us and some people hate us, but everyone agrees on one thing: Jeff Green is one hot tamale.

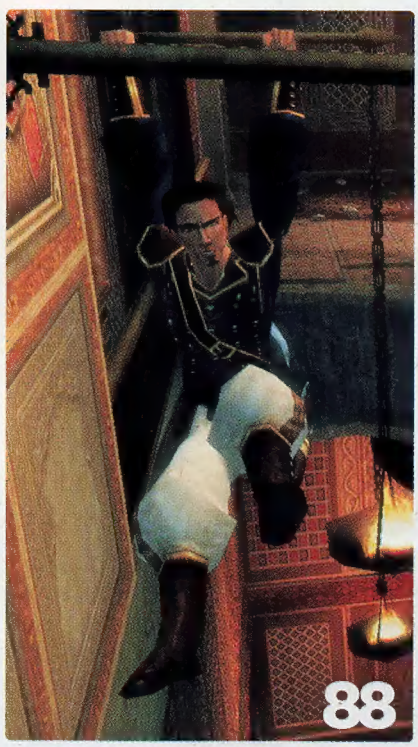
22 Radar
Gaze into our crystal ball for a look at the 10 best games of 2004. Plus, an early look at **Sam & Max: Freelance Police**, and what could be the world's first butt-simple PC gaming console.

40 Previews
We managed to get our greedy little hands on the *Battlefield*-like **Star Wars: Battlefront**, then went deep into the jungles of **Battlefield Vietnam**. And that's not even going into our first looks at **Warlords Battlecry III**, **Ground Control 2: Operation Exodus**, and a whole lot more.

GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS 57

COVER STORY

It's our annual Games of the Year awards issue, and the decision-making was tougher than ever. That's not a complaint, though. In a great year for PC games, here are our picks for the best of the best.



72 Reviews

Santa left a big, wrinkly bag for us over the holidays, and once we saw it didn't belong to a large, diseased animal, we dug right in and found some gems among the coal. A few—like **Prince of Persia**, **Beyond Good & Evil**, and **America's Army: Special Forces**—are worth rushing out and selling your kidney for right now. Others—like **Deus Ex** and the **Neverwinter Nights** expansion—aren't worth your toenail clippings.

100 Tech

Wil reviews **iBuypower's Pentium 4 Extreme Edition**, Jeff Lackey beats up on **Hercules'** awesome **LCD**, Joel Durham offers some BIOS-tweaking tips, and Loyd Case picks his favorite bits of hardware for 2003. And of course, there's a new "on topic" Wil Power and Tech Medic.

111 Check Out

For all the things that rock and the ones that are really a crock, come over to this section to hear us talk. Or else we'll go to your house, and soon the police will be lining up the chalk.

126 Scorched Earth

Robert's black heart suddenly drips with the honeyed milk of love.

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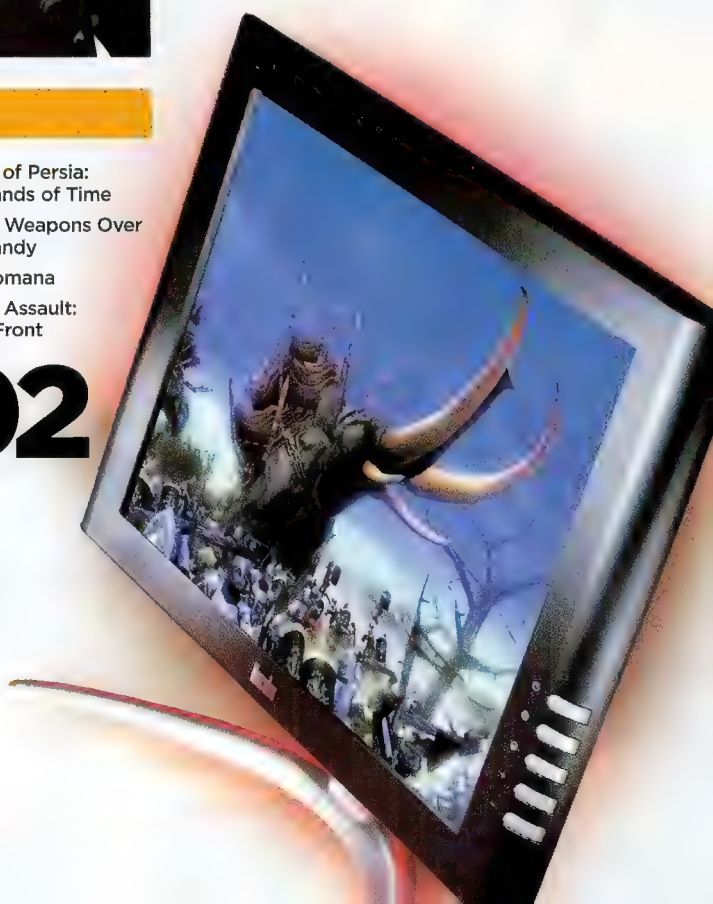
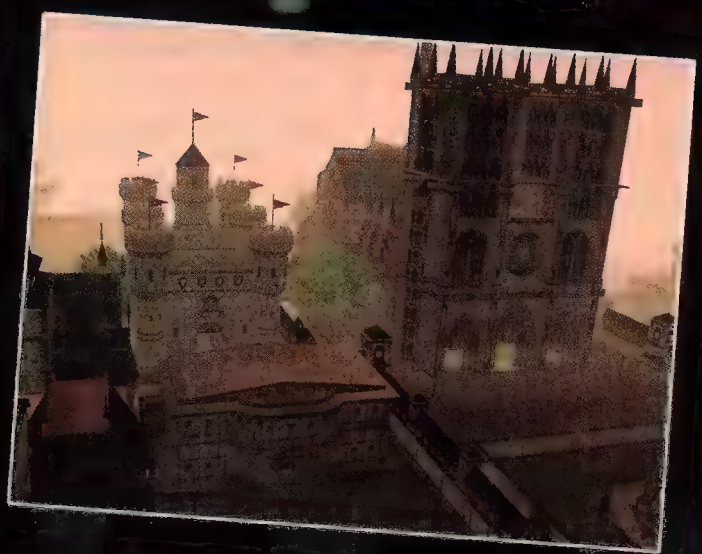


STATE OF THE ART.



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A Very Good Year Indeed

Or, why I hate passing out Game of the Year awards

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

¡Ay caramba! We are not at the Game of the Year awards again already, are we? Jeez. I really hate awards ceremonies. A lifetime of watching the wrong movies, TV shows, music, and *American Idol* contestants win awards every single year has turned me off to the whole process. Plus, I'm bitter. Why? Because every Friday, I enter the wet T-shirt contest here at our local sports bar, and every time, I lose to some good-looking female. Like that's fair. Like I'm not hot in a wet T-shirt, too. Way to have no credibility.

So, yeah, anyway: We're handing out awards this issue. Yay. Seriously, the reason I'm frustrated about this year's awards is that it was such a great year for PC gaming, there aren't enough awards to go around. The winners are all worthy, but just to focus on the winners would be deceptive and limiting. So if you're looking for something to buy, look at all the nominees—they all rule this year and they're all worthy of your attention. And, remember, just because we didn't pick your game as a winner doesn't mean we didn't think it was awesome. There were lots of tough decisions this year. That's why we get paid slightly more than minimum wage here. Life is hard.

KEN BROWN
EDITOR
Some say Ken is the love child of Johnny Wilson and Scorpia, but only Scorpia would know for sure, and she's not talking. But the way Ken guffaws like Johnny and scuttles into his dark office seems like more than coincidence. Then there's the DOS games....

KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR
Kristen's classy exterior belies her inner love of malt liquor and watching A's games from the bleachers. At least she doesn't eat peanut butter-mayo-lettuce sandwiches like Old Mom. Best not cross our mommy or she will destroy you—and we got her back, yo.

ROBERT COFFEY
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
Robert's devotion to Krav Maga—an Israeli martial art aimed at disabling attackers—is a little unnerving. Three times a week he practices eye gouging, groin kicking, and limb breaking. So we're all really eager to disagree with him. "Sure Robert! Heh heh, that's a great idea!"

DARREN GLADSTONE
PREVIEWS EDITOR
Darren doesn't own a car. In fact, he never has and probably never will. So why in the hell did we let this jackass get behind the wheel to play *Need for Speed Underground*? Two reasons: 1) we're tired of driving his sorry butt to press events, 2) skid marks. Ewww.

WILLIAM O'NEAL
TECH EDITOR
Wil had a choice between going to the nation's No. 1 public university or another school with sauce that runs like water and decisively finer ladies. Guess which one he chose. If he had it all to do over again, he'd fit in twice as much booze and women. Or go with the 10-year plan.

JOHNNY LIU
ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Socially, Johnny is going backwards. Popular preschooler. High school president. Homecoming prince. Now, he's a videogame-playing dork. When he's 50, Johnny will live in the sewers. It'll be fun scurrying around in filth and hiding from the hateful sun.

RYAN SCOTT
CD-ROM EDITOR
Ah, the mild-mannered underdog of *CGW*. Underpaid, unappreciated, tossed about from cubicle to cubicle like a leaf in a storm, Ryan keeps his good humor and sometimes puts out great demo discs. (And I keep sharpening my katana for Judgment Day.—Ryan)

ROB SCHULTZ
ART DIRECTOR
True fact: Rob Schultz has one blue eye and one brown eye. We don't know what it means. But we do know we often leave his office disoriented and with money missing from our wallets. And when he snaps his fingers we bark like dogs. It's weird.

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR
MJ plays the part of dedicated designer, but it's obvious to the rest of us that his *CGW* career is just a stepping stone to his true love: sheep farming. He's often overheard mumbling "That'll be the life, watchin the dog chase the sheep..free sweaters...lambchops—nice...."

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Letters

Bugged about bugs

While Robert Coffey's holiday wish list was right on the money [Scorched Earth, January 2004], I think he should take this once in a lifetime (unless you hit the reset button, of course) opportunity to wish for something that would benefit the entire world. No, screw world peace—if we had such an animal, then half of PC's greatest games would be no more. I am talking about a new law. Yes, you read that right...we should be allowed by the Supreme Court to drive up to game publishers' mansions and torture them for all eternity for pushing titles out the window to make their quarterly financial numbers. What ever happened to beta testing? Numerous titles have been patched the same day they hit the shelves. *Need For Speed Underground* has menu resolution issues with most ATI cards, *KOTOR* slows to a crawl due to sound issues with Live 5.1 cards, *Halo* runs like elf poo-poo on a semidecent system, and the Technical FAQ always points to the same answer: "Make sure your drivers are up to date for your hardware."

I am getting a heart attack with all this anger building up inside me, so I say no more.

MAsKrA

P.S. What ever happened to *Duke Nukem Forever*?

And another thing—get off his lawn!!

I remember a time long ago when I could buy a $40 to $50 first-person game and be entertained for days or weeks. But where have those games gone? Nowadays, it seems like everything I buy has about 10 to 15 hours of content, and that's it. Look at *Max Payne 2, Jedi Academy,* or *Deus Ex*—what happened to the content? What happened to the story? Are developers focusing so much on eye candy and multiplayer that they leave the storytelling to professional authors? With the current state of FPS multiplayer, I'd rather spend my days at the dentist than in the kindergarten classroom of an online server. And what is this notion of "replayability" when the story never changes? Am I supposed to play the game on a harder level after I finish it the first time just so I can save more often? Is that replayability, my ability to replay a given section over and over since I cannot get past it on supergodlike mode?

Good games to me are like books; they tell a story and keep you so entwined in them that you don't notice the sun set and rise and set again. Please God, don't make *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* big letdowns....

Rob
Daytona Beach, FL

CGW redesign feedback

Kudos on the new look. Especially the staff page. Its yellow and orange harvesty nature reminded me of Thanksgiving, which reminded me of the dead turkey meat still in my fridge. Overall, it's really nice. But whoever took Jeff Green's picture should have to do some serious penance. Check Out is the best idea for the nonglossy, cheap-paper section of the mag. I likes. Huzzah, Mr. Liu.

Steve

Help, my eyes are bleeding! I really enjoy reading all the articles in the magazine, but the new format with the light gray and small black print over solid blue and red backdrops is very hard to read, and I'm sure that wasn't your goal. I know the art team needs to "redo" the look of the mag each year (it validates their existence at the company), but for the love of all good things, those color blocks have gotta go.

Todd

The redesigned issue is excellent, but I didn't know you were redesigning your editor. Is that picture really Jeff or porn star Randy Spears on a bad day? You

Fugly in Chief

The new layout in the January 2004 issue of *CGW* was impressive, but there was one thing that surprised me: the staff page! Like the first 5 minutes when you finally meet your clanmates in person, I turned the page to a shocking sight—pictures of the people I'd been reading about for over a year now. Not that any of you were overwhelmingly unattractive, but it's hard to make the transition between the people you've created in your mind and the people as they are in real life. The most horrifying, however, was Jeff Green. In his old column photo, I had always seen a slightly older version of Animal Planet's Jeff Corwin. Tall, dark, handsome. I was, for lack of a better word, horrified to see my Jeff with that creepy half-smirk and awkward buzz cut. Oh, Jeff, what am I going to do with you?

Rachel
Indianapolis, IN

Mail Bites

Keep doing what you do best, my beloved *CGW*, and screw yourself raw.

—Wanker

My sister has a birdcage requiring continual crap catchers. I can think of nothing better for the job than your magazine.... Keep 'em coming *CGW*! From now on, I will get my game reviews from your competition.

—Danny Mignone

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This jungle makes the Amazon seem like a botanical garden.

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Hey kids, now you don't have to wait a whole month to say you love us! Just go to the official *CGW* message board at **boards.1up.com/zd** and post right now! That's right, within seconds of reading this, you too can have your opinions on everything from Wil's hair to our latest reviews published online for the entire world, including your mother, to see! So, go now! Post! Big up yourself! Don't be part of the silent majority! Be part of the annoying, whiny minority!

I have gone from the "Thank God I'm a country geek. I'm so happy I just milked the cows. I'm a redneck" look to the "I have the greatest job on the planet, it's early afternoon and I'm wasted, I AM a true babe magnet" smirk. By the way, Just For Men will take care of the little problem around the temples. I speak from experience.

Computer Dave from NJ

Please convey my thanks to your art design guy for making parts of your magazine unreadable, so now I don't have to waste as much time reading it. Please note that itsy-bitsy black text + colorful background = eyestrain.

Victor De Grande
San Leandro, CA

Just wanted to send a couple comments about the mag. The new look is cool: very clean, easier on they eyes. I like it. It can stay.

The Check Out section is great. I always build my own PCs, so your reviews of full machines were not really useful to me. I've always wished you would break down the components and peripherals more often for us do-it-yourselfers, and now my wish has been granted.

Finally, I've always enjoyed Robert Coffey's enlightened POV in Scorched Earth, but the last couple of articles have actually been relevant and insightful in addition to entertaining. Whether he continues being relevant and insightful, or just grotesque and demented, I'll still be reading.

Kevin

Although most of the time the strategies in Gamer's Edge were so basic that readers really learned nothing new, there were some gems (albeit few and far between), such as your four-part *WarCraft III* strategy guide and the now-classic *Impossible Creatures* strategy guide. Will I miss Gamer's Edge? I think so. Reading strategy guides in a magazine is still better than getting them from the Internet.

JM Cruz
Makati City, Philippines

Someone actually liked our DVD

Giving gamers free games? You must be nuts! As I was playing *Warlords* and *Thief II*, I kept saying to myself, "I can't believe this is free." Like any self-respecting PC gamer, I already had *Deus Ex*, but it's still quite impressive that it's on there...for free! To put the icing on the cake, you also slapped on the *Doom 95* shareware, so I get to bask in the glorious nostalgia! The best disc ever from any magazine, hands down. If you can talk one game company a month into letting you give away an older game, I'll immediately cancel all subscriptions to other magazines. I agree with your reviews more anyway. Happy gaming!

Matt Woodley

Thank you, and congratulations on being the one person in America who didn't hate us for giving away free games on a DVD.

The devil and Mrs. Malaise

My wife has told me not to leave the January issue of your magazine lying around, due to the picture of the *Doom 3* "weirdo" on the front. Apparently, it's freaking her out. Is there anywhere I can buy it as a poster?

Patrique Malaise
Toronto, Canada

You'd have to ask Id about a poster, but given your wife's reaction, we don't recommend you try to get it. Save your money and buy a new wife.

Mail Bites

Jeff! What's up with that new pic?? You are SCARY, man! BTW, Wil rules, he is way cooler than Samuel L. Jackson, and I want a job there working with him! ROCK ON!!!!!!!!

—John Pertwee

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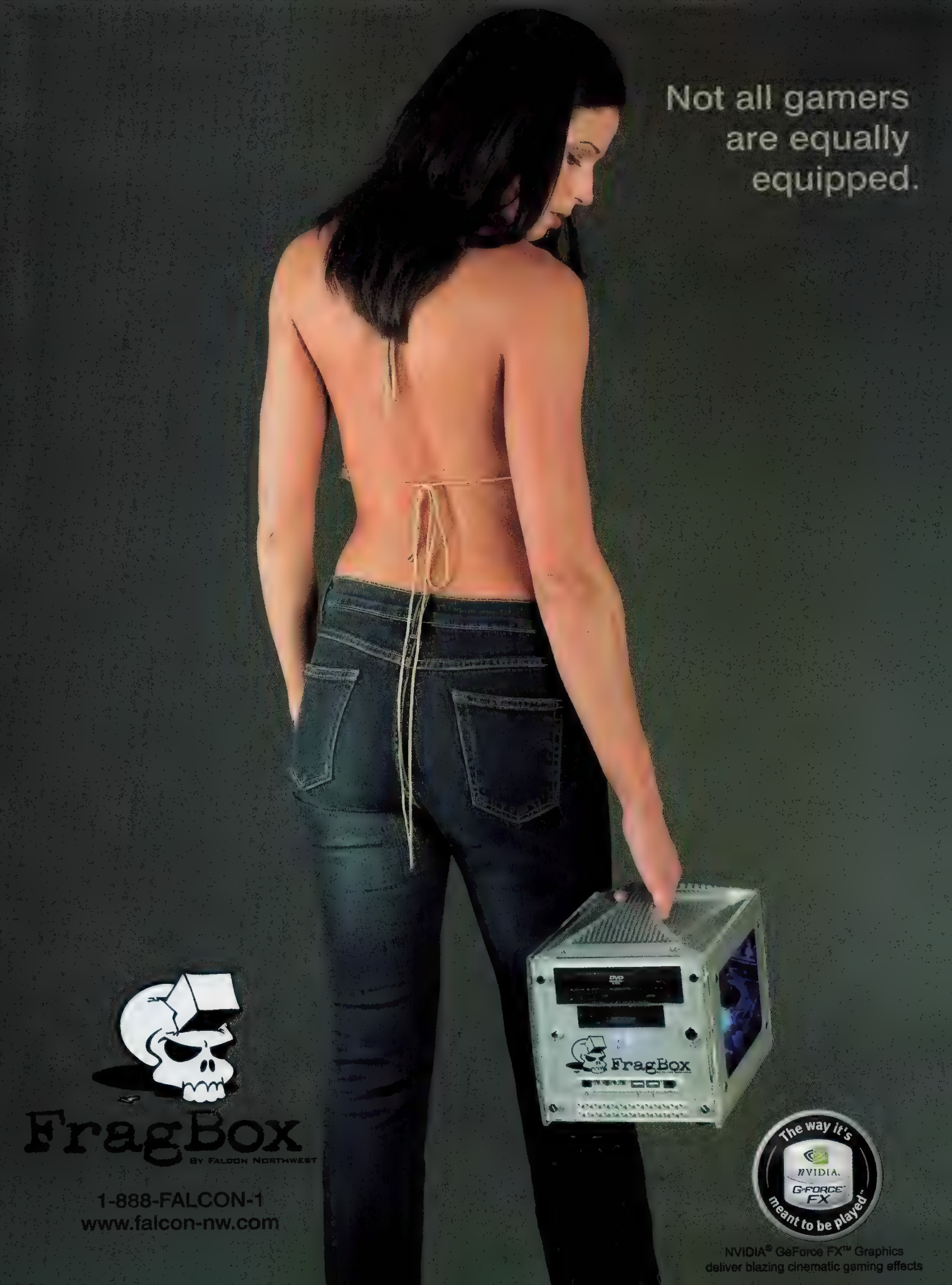
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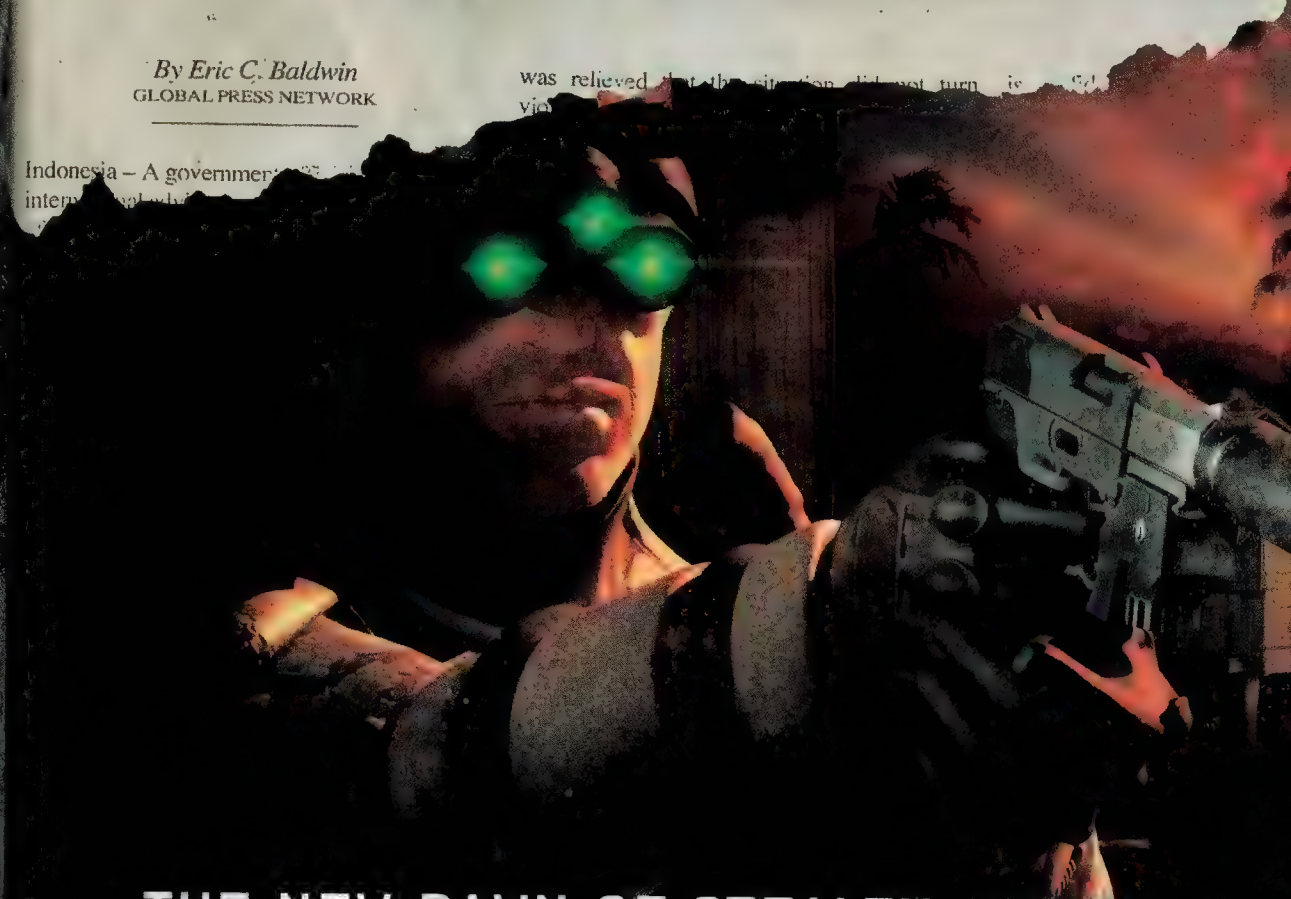

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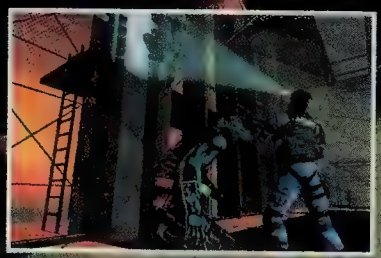

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PREDICTIONS

Top 10 Games of 2004

Our odds-on favorites for what the year's best will bring

Unless you're a fervent console zealot, you've probably noticed PC gaming is back in the saddle again. In fact, 2003 was supposed to be "the year of the PC," with *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* scheduled to ship in the fall. It was still a great year—abundantly evidenced in our awards feature—but now, both of these giant-killers are scheduled for 2004, along with a few dozen other potential greats.

We're happy to report that picking just 10 games for 2004 was pretty tough. How do you decide with an embarrassment of riches that includes *World of WarCraft, Sam & Max 2, Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault, Operation Flashpoint 2, Quake IV, S.T.A.L.K.E.R., Tribes: Vengeance*, and more? The only game we felt could be safely excluded was *Duke Nukem Forever*, since it'll never be finished.

Let us know what you're looking forward to on the message boards at www.1Up.com.

Half-Life 2, Valve Software

Odds: Even

OK, so Valve has had a string of bad luck and missed deadlines since announcing *Half-Life 2* last year. But that doesn't mean the game won't blow us all away when it finally ships. Valve did it once, and no one's made a better

inside

30 Sam & Max
Bizarre evildoers beware! The dynamic duo of adventure gaming weirdness is back.

Child's Play
Penny Arcade scores big with a toy drive for a Seattle Children's Hospital.

34 PC Console
They said it couldn't be done, but some people just won't listen.

game since. Our bet is that the company can do it again.

Battlefield Vietnam

Odds: Even

Once we played it we were hooked— in some respects, it's more fun than *Battlefield 1942*. The jungle not only adds atmosphere, it's also the defining element of the new game's design. The graphics are great, and there's a ton of vehicles and weapons, plus 17 songs from the era—there's nothing like flying into combat in a Huey listening to *Ride of the Valkyries*. Apocalypse now!

Doom 3

Odds: 2 to 1

It's a war of the gargantuans between *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*. Id's baby looked awesome when we saw it a couple months ago—scary as hell and utterly gorgeous. But will it feel fresh with largely *Doom*-era weapons? Here's hoping the gameplay and level design are as cool as the engine.

Full Spectrum Warrior

Odds: 2 to 1

For those craving some quality tactical action, this looks to be a sure thing. What we've seen amounts to Tom Clancy's *Pikmin*—that is, intense military strategy without all the micromanagement. The only trick right now: We actually need to see the PC version in action.

Rome: Total War

Odds: 2 to 1

Not since *Civ III* have we been so excited about a strategy title, but this looks like a landmark game for the ages: epic battles with huge armies, cinematic graphics, war elephants, siege engines—even war dogs. Creative Assembly (*Shogun, Medieval: Total War*) has a reputation for polished, balanced, deep games, so we can't wait to unleash hell.

Battle for Middle-earth

Odds: 2 to 1

The RTS heads behind the Command & Conquer: Generals games are hard at work on this *Lord of the Rings*–fueled title. Why are we excited (besides the fact that we're dorks)? Aside from the graphical goodness is a promising game structure; control individual *LOTR* heroes, squads, or massive armies that intelligently wade into battle.

Valve did it once and no one has made a better game since. Our bet is that the company can do it again.

Unreal Tournament 2004

Odds 2 to 1

Now that it's actually shipping in 2004, we can look forward to throwing it down on deathmatches, the return of the greatly missed assault rounds, and terror from above via many new vehicles. Plus, there will be a 64-bit processing version that has Wil's tech side all in a tizzy.

The Sims 2

Odds: 2 to 1

The addition of simulated life-spans, persistent digital DNA in families, tons of new behaviors and items, and a vastly improved graphics engine make The Sims 2 a sure thing. PC gaming snobs may look down their +2 Noses of Dorkitude at the franchise, but The Sims line is as hardcore as any "gamer's game" and features the kind of intense player input that makes strategy classics.

Sid Meier's Pirates!

Odds: 3 to 1

We're going out on a limb with this one because we haven't seen it yet, but this is Sid Meier, and this is his remake of his own 1987 classic, one of the most beloved computer games ever made. The action-RPG to watch for in 2004.

Freedom Force 2

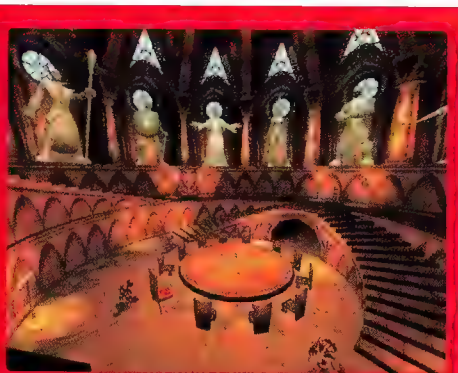
Odds: 5 to 1

We're confident that Irrational Games can deliver another deep, comic-book-based strategy-RPG. The big question now is, can the brilliantly loving tongue-in-cheek humor of the first *Freedom Force* make the transition to the earlier golden age of comics? Everyone loves beating Nazis, but can they be as funny as the outlandish villains of the original game? We sure hope so.

MMORPGS

Odds: 500 to 1

Will there be a breakout MMORPG this year? Probably not. Every other "sure thing" MMO (i.e., *Star Wars Galaxies, The Sims Online*) has proven that the online goldmine of *EverQuest* may be more illusory than first believed. Every big title on tap for 2004 has not only the enormous hurdle of player ennui to leap, but also its own potential problems. *City of Heroes*? No loot, no player-villains, no capes. *Ultima X: Odyssey*? How many younger gamers know about this franchise beyond the crap-tacular *Ascension*? *Matrix Online*? Have you seen the last two movies, or been suckered into buying the game? Of the lot, *World of WarCraft* and *EQ2* have the most hope, basically because Blizzard tends to get things very right and *EQ2* can coast by slightly improving on its mysterious winning formula. That said, any MMO is a long shot at best to hold any interest for any length of time.



The Good, the Bad & the Ugly

News and views from the Wild West

The Good

Turbine buys *Asheron's Call 2* license

Here's a nice victory for the "little guy." Turbine Entertainment, feeling flush, purchased the rights to its massive-multiplayer game, *Asheron's Call*, back from corporate behemoth Microsoft, thus ensuring the game can continue to grow and develop, without being subject to the whims of the Dark Lord of Seattle. With *D&D Online* and *Middle-earth Online* also on Turbine's slate, they are definitely the online game developer to watch in the coming year.

The Bad

Weak sales of good games

This one isn't just bad, it's downright depressing. As of January, two of the best games of 2003, Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* and *Beyond Good & Evil* were both suffering from poor sales, forcing Ubisoft to desperately lower prices, and, in the case of *BG&E*, abandon any notion of a sequel. Ubisoft blew it big by shoving these games out during an overcrowded Xmas season, and this is the result.

The Ugly

Rampant code leaks

It's a terrible problem: game code leaking out onto the Internet before the games are actually finished. Following the disastrous *Half-Life 2* leak, which stupidly helped get that game postponed, in January, three more games apparently suffered from code leaks: *Painkiller*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, and *World of WarCraft*. Folks, it's not funny, and it helps no one. Do those who are trying to entertain you for a living a favor and do not download leaked, early versions of games. Go buy *Beyond Good & Evil* instead.

WHUP WHUP WHUP WHUP WHUP WHUP WHUP

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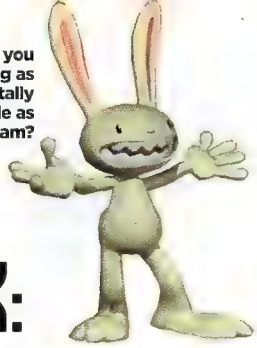


Are you feeling as mentally unstable as I am?

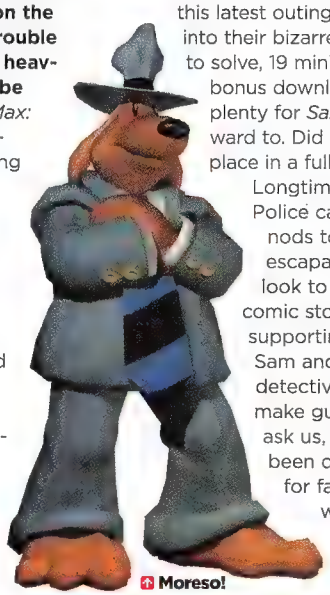
RECON

Sam & Max: Freelance Police

Lookie, Sam! It's the appalling visage of crime!

Need someone to take care of that beast from the cereal aisle? Having a bad day on the moon? Got some trouble with monkeys violating the heavenly temple? *Ghostbusters* be damned—you need *Sam & Max: Freelance* Police. Like a soul-sucking simulacrum swimming down your throat and possessing the hell out of you, the dynamic duo of adventure gaming weirdness is coming your way.

The madcap comic-book creations of Steve Purcell, Sam (a "canine shamus") and Max (a "hyperkinetic rabbity thing") are self-employed crime-fighters, punishing evildoers (and anyone else who gets in the way) with their own illogical brand of justice. Their hit 1993 adventure *Sam & Max Hit the Road* laced plenty of the duo's signature humor into the traditional LucasArts-style adventure gameplay, and this latest outing promises a similar journey into their bizarre world. Six separate cases to solve, 19 minigames to unlock, and bonus downloadable content means plenty for *Sam & Max* fans to look forward to. Did we mention that it takes place in a full 3D environment?



Moreso!

Longtime fans of the Freelance Police can also expect quite a few nods to their comic book escapades. The various missions look to echo some of the classic comic story lines, and a few key supporting characters—such as Sam and Max's insane, hard-boiled detective neighbor, Flint Paper—make guest appearances. If you ask us, the PC gaming world has been deprived of Sam and Max for far too long. You can bet we'll be waiting eagerly for the summer release of *Sam & Max: Freelance Police.* **Ryan Scott**

The dynamic duo of adventure-gaming weirdness is coming your way.

Console Corner

What's worth taking from your little brother

We can't live in a vacuum. There actually are—gasp!—good games that are only available on the consoles. Here's this month's pick:

James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing, Electronic Arts (Xbox, PS2, GC)
While James Bond's record on the PC front earns him a goldfinger, the console games have generally been good. The newest in the series is probably the most ambitious attempt to put a Walther PPK in your hands. The big push in this third person action/stealth game is for the flavor of an honest-to-god film. No expense has been spared as *007* boasts dramatic camera angles and a story penned by the guy who wrote *GoldenEye*. Some will be

excited about all the celebrity talent in this game (Willem Dafoe, Pierce Brosnan, Heidi Klum and so on), but we're looking forward to the driving levels worked on by the team behind *Need for Speed Underground.*
Darren Gladstone

Also noteworthy: *Ninja Gaiden* (Xbox) and *Wrath Unleashed* (PS2/Xbox)

The Nerd Herd

Street geeks speak

What was your favorite PC game of 2003?

Michael Hawash
HOUSTON, TEXAS
Battlefield 1942 improved throughout 2003 with well-designed expansions and user-created mods. *BF 1942* continues to wow me with an incredible multiplayer experience that has yet to be topped. Runner up: *Call of Duty.*

Aaron Ko
SAN FRANCISCO, CA
Final Fantasy XI, after swearing I'd never play a MMORPG again. The allure of an FF game online proved too great for my frail will.

Ariel Celeste
OAKLAND, CA
Call of Duty. The gameplay and cinematics brought a new look and feel to the WW II genre. The attack on Stalingrad is like nothing I have seen before.

Marcus Eikenberry
PORTLAND, OR
Star Wars Galaxies, without a doubt, is my personal favorite of the year. There's nothing like working hard to achieve the goal of being a Jedi and being close to doing it.

Seth Welch
DALY CITY, CA
By far, *Call of Duty.* When you start off in Stalingrad, you feel the intensity. One in three soldiers are allotted a gun. Of course you're not one of the three, and you have to find the nearest corpse with a free gun for survival.

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"...Horizons is the game to get this year." E3 2003 – Game of Show - *IGN Vault*

"...simply amazing to behold." E3 2003 - Best of Show: RPG - *DailyGame*

"...a cut above most MMORPGs...unique elements that have never been seen in any massively multiplayer title." - *Adrenaline Vault*

"...your ticket out of your old and boring game/life." - *UGO*

"...unique character classes and deep skill system..." - *Gamezone*

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BONUS POINTS

Gamers Give Big for Kids Hospital

Penny Arcade brings the toys and the noise, noise, noise

That jolly fat guy in the red suit had some help this holiday season, and the kids at the Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle scored big.

Jerry Holkins (Tycho) and Mike Krahulik (Gabe), who run the popular gaming site Penny Arcade (www.penny-arcade.com), organized a toy drive they called Child's Play for the Children's Hospital in Seattle, and the response from Penny Arcade readers was monumental.

"It's been amazing," said Krahulik, the artist who draws the Penny Arcade strip. "Our readers have really gone above and beyond to help these kids. We've collected over $175,000 in toys and cash. That's just incredible."

In part, Child's Play started as a response to some of the negative press gaming has gotten whenever some nutcase commits a violent crime.

"The media seems intent on perpetuating the myth that gamers are ticking time bombs just waiting to go off," Krahulik wrote on Penny Arcade's website. "I know for a fact that gamers are good people.... We are just regular people who happen to love videogames."

Krahulik and Holkins hoped Child's Play might counter some of that negative publicity while benefiting a worthwhile charity. "Some of these kids are in pretty bad shape and just having a Game Boy would really raise their spirits," Krahulik said. He and Holkins have been heartened by the response Child's Play has received.

"It has really surprised us. I think we each expected to bring in a few thousand dollars' worth of stuff. The level of support from the community for this project has really blown us away," said Krahulik.

The Children's Hospital in Seattle, which treats 190,000 children each year, is happy for the support. "We are very grateful and appreciative of Penny Arcade and the online community for their Child's Play gift drive to benefit Children's patients," said Kim Korte, Child Life Manager at the hospital. Korte said that the toys and gifts will be given to patients throughout the year and will also be distributed at Children's Playroom, outpatient clinics, and regional clinic locations.

If you didn't hear about Child's Play in time to contribute last year, you'll get another chance this year. Penny Arcade hopes to expand the toy drive to benefit even more hospitals. It looks like Tycho and Gabe will be giving Santa a run for his money. **Mark Asher**

Reality Check

How the ratings stack up among the gaming press

Game	CGW	PC Gamer	CGM	GameSpot	IGN.com	GameSpy	1UP.com	GameRankings.com
C&C Generals: Zero Hour	B+	C	A	A-	A	A-	—	A-
Contract J.A.C.K	D	C	D	C	C	C	D+	C
Final Fantasy XI	B+	—	B+	B+	B+	B+	—	A-
Freedom Fighters	B+	B	D	A	B+	B+	B-	B+
Railroad Tycoon 3	A	A-	D	A-	A-	B+	—	A-
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic	A+	—	A+	A-	A	A+	A-	A

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TECH

Close N Play

They said it couldn't be done—a PC game console

We always considered "plug and play" an impossible dream for the PC, but some guys never got the message. A company called DISC has introduced patented technology that lets gamers drop any Windows game into a console and play it instantly. Patches and game updates are delivered via broadband or dial-up while the user sleeps.

The DISCover PC game console is a closed system designed to play PC games and function as a kind of media center for DVDs, CDs, and music files. It has the guts of a PC, but it's not designed to let you navigate Windows or surf the web. It's purpose is to bring the great library of PC titles to the masses, simply and affordably, with multiplayer support.

DISC has so far licensed the technology to Apex and Alienware, which are expected to ship units this year. Both models support keyboards, a mouse, USB controllers, and online connectivity (Ethernet and modem). The $400 Apex unit will use a 1.4GHz Pentium 4 chip with Nforce graphics. Alienware's box will boast an AMD FX-51 processor, 1GB of memory, and an Nvidia GeForce 5950 Ultra card; the pricing and street date are still undetermined.

The company is working with Microsoft's Enabled Devices Group and GameSpy to use Windows XP Embedded, along with GameSpy's online connectivity. Once connected to the Internet, the system recognizes your installed games and automatically downloads patches and updates. When the hard drive fills up, the device uninstalls the least-used programs to free up space (but doesn't delete saved games).

We'll have to see how the first systems shake out, but if the device works as advertised it could be a great alternative for those who want to play PC games without the hassles and expense. **Ken Brown**

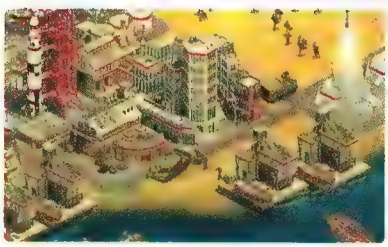
Rise of Nations Contest

Win copies of RON and the new expansion Throne and Patriots

Who wants to take over the world for free? Sorry, Chairman Kim, only U.S. residents are eligible. If you're a cheapskate megalomaniac (and frankly, who isn't?), just answer the following questions and you could win a signed copy of the upcoming *Rise of Nations* expansion *Throne and Patriots*, along with a copy of the original game.

Five lucky nerds will be chosen at random from among those who answer the questions correctly. Got it? OK, here goes:

1. How many ages are there in *Rise of Nations*?
2. In which age can you build the Kremlin?
3. Which final technology allows the instant construction of units?



Send the answers, along with your name, address, and phone number, to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com. Please include RON CONTEST in the subject line, and be sure to say hi to Ryan Scott, the half-starved editorial half-wit who'll have to go through all your entries to pick the winners.

Good luck, strategy fans!

Top 5 Downloads

The best things in life are free

This month we focus on demos of less well-known games that are worth checking out.

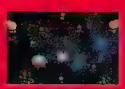
1 Dominions 2

WWW.SHRAPNELGAMES.COM

This turn-based fantasy-strategy game is so deep that once you begin learning its intricacies you won't resurface for weeks.

2 Star Chamber

WWW.STARCHAMBER.NET



4X strategy meets collectible card gaming, and for much less money than Magic: The Gathering Online.

3 Combat Mission: Afrika Korps

WWW.BATTLEFRONT.COM

The best tactical WWII game is back, and this time players can duke it out in the deserts of North Africa, the mountains of Italy, and on the islands of Crete and Sicily.

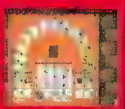
4 X-Plane: Space Combat

WWW.X-PLANE.COM

The gameplay in this space shooter is currently simplistic, but the accurate space physics engine and customization options will keep you coming back for more.

5 Hardwood Solitaire III

WWW.SILVERCRK.COM



Solitaire with all the little touches. Silver Creek adds to maintain its reputation as the best purveyor of traditional card games. Bar none. Auto-completion routines make this a perfect laptop computer companion.

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FIELD TRIP

Captain Kirk Beams Down

First GenCon in Southern California a little too intimate

GenCon came to Southern California last December, slipping quietly into Anaheim with a modest crowd swallowed by a convention center that felt two sizes too large. There were the usual board games, role playing systems, and collectibles, but it's clear that collectible card games are dominant. "Are these cards valuable?" William Shatner asked those who'd come to hear him speak. "So, there are 52 of them?" No, there are a few hundred, someone in the audience explained. "Oh, so you don't play cards with them?"

The low turnout was evident in the several hundred empty chairs at the Shatner Q&A. "I've seen more people in the men's room," he joked, before chatting with the assembled group of about 100 people. "A very intimate afternoon with Grandpa Shatner," someone whispered as he held forth with a few rambling but entertaining anecdotes.

As far as gaming goes, there's wasn't much to see: *America's Army*, an nVidia booth, the E3 build of Activision's *Vampires* game, Sierra's *Ground Control 2* and *Middle-earth Online*, and a couple of already released LucasArts titles. A 10-year-old boy turned off a demo of JoWood's *Spellforce* to join a *Call of Duty* server, effectively doing an end run around an uninhabited LAN that charged by the hour.

GenCon CEO Peter Adkison said the turnout of 4725 people exceeded expectations (GenCon in Indianapolis draws about 25,000 people). "We're very happy," he said. "Some exhibitors might have been expecting more people, but we tried to manage expectations." With contracts signed for the next two years, this GenCon still has plenty of room to grow. **Tom Chick**

Grandpa Shatner holds forth. Isn't there a home for aging, loopy sci-fi TV stars? There should be.

NEWS

Interplay Eats Its Young, Closes Black Isle Studios

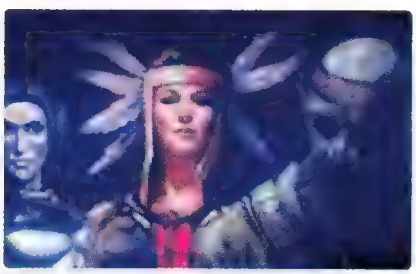
The Fallout license appears to be up for sale

Like crash survivors stranded in the Andes turning to cannibalism, Interplay, stranded on a mountain of debt, may be eating its own children.

Although Interplay hasn't made an official announcement, members of Black Isle Studios said the entire Black Isle staff has been laid off and the division has been dissolved. Black Isle Studios was working on—oh the pain!—Fallout 3.

According to an anonymous source, Interplay likely plans to sell the Fallout license to generate revenue so that other, lesser-known games in development can be completed.

"It's kind of twisted if you think about it," said the source. "The guys working on the more successful brand get let go because it can be sold, while the ones working on the crappier brand get to keep their jobs."



Light a candle in remembrance of Black Isle Studios.

Black Isle Studios was responsible for such notable games as Planescape: Torment, the Icewind Dale series, and Fallout 2, among others. **Mark Asher**

5, 10, 15 Years Ago in *CGW*

What we said when you were nursing

5 Years Ago, March 1999

Under the delusion that readers hungered for personal info about all of us, we decided to run little writer bios with every review and preview. What did we learn from this? That "Bob Proctor has it on good authority he learned to say 'choo-choo' before 'mama'" and that "Kenneth Johnson was made into a vampire in the late 14th century." We also found out that "Robert Coffey has killed 28 fat greasy slugs while living in a basement." And yet we still kept him on staff. Good judgment is not exactly our strong point.

10 Years Ago, March 1994

Kingmaker may have dominated the cover, but *Doom* took over inside. This watershed moment in gaming earned the kind of gushing praise we saved for hex-based tank simulations in those hoary old days: "a new benchmark," "the most believable environment...ever," "brooding, sinister flavor," and—the understatement of the year—"Deathmatches may be the most intense gaming experience available today." We didn't just like it, we loved it, and like the gamers everywhere busily crashing their universities' servers, our lives would never be the same again.

15 Years Ago, March 1994

"Our experienced reviewer says *Battles of Napoleon* is BETTER THAN SEX!" Man alive, that is just so...sad. So terribly, terribly sad. Sad sad sad sad sad. That is the all-time most saddestly sad three-hankie sad weeper of a sad, sad headline in recorded history. "*Battles of Napoleon* is BETTER THAN SEX!" It hurts just to read it. Ugh. Interesting tidbit: The reviewer was humanely euthanized shortly after submitting this review. A merciful closure to a sad saga.

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SPEND SOME TIME WITH THE FAMILY.
Move through the fast-paced world of organized crime in Gangland, the game that's part sim, part role-player and all action. Experience 44 explosive multiplayer and single-player levels in Paradise City. Take in the sights with free camera rotation in full 3D and zoom. Interact with AI-driven characters so real you'll swear you could feel the evil chill around them. Keep your wits about you and your clip full, because you never know who you can trust, even in your own family. CAPICE?
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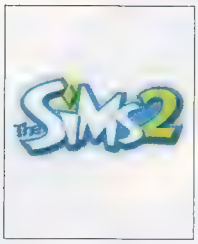
THIS MONTH'S TOP 5 PRE-ORDERS



The Sims 2 *(Electronic Arts)* Your Sims will be more life-like, responsive, and more complex than ever before. You'll be able to control your Sims over their entire lifetimes. And since every Sim will have its own DNA, their appearance and personality will be passed down through the generations.

Half-Life 2 *(Sierra)* Research scientist Gordon Freeman finds himself on an alien-infested Earth being picked to the bone, its resources depleted, its populace dwindling. He is thrust into the unenviable role of rescuing the world from the wrong he unleashed back at Black Mesa.

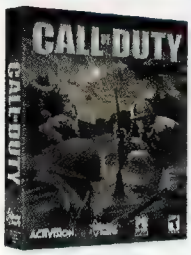
Doom 3 *(Activision)* One of the most highly anticipated titles of 2003 and the next revolution in action gaming and technology. Featuring an enhanced storyline, spine-chilling, bloodcurdling, altogether unfriendly environment, and music by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails.

Counter-Strike: Condition Zero *(Sierra)* This new standalone game extends the award-winning Counter-Strike multiplayer game with new maps, weapons, and more while simultaneously introducing new technologies, an extensive single-player campaign, and cooperative play.

Unreal Tournament 2004 *(Atari)* Reload, rev up and ride out. This sequel is faster, higher and meaner than ever. Land and air based vehicles take combat to a new level. An arsenal of new weaponry, daunting arenas and battlefields make the gladiator blood sport of the future a brand new experience.

THIS MONTH'S TOP 5 RELEASES

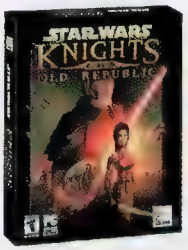
The Sims Makin' Magic Expan-sion Pack *(Electronic Arts)* Your Sims can now harness the supernatural, casting spells with playful or mischievous intentions. With over 175 new items, a new carnival-themed location, and a host of new quirky characters, the neighborhood will never be the same.



Call of Duty *(Activision)* Delivers the gritty realism and cinematic intensity of World War II's epic battlefield moments like never before—through the eyes of citizen soldiers and unsung heroes from an alliance of countries who together helped shape the course of modern history.

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword *(Ubisoft)* In this expansion pack for Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield, you command the world's most elite, multinational squad of counter-terrorist operatives in their latest mission to track the desperate remnants of Gospic's terrorist organization.

URU: Ages Beyond Myst *(Ubisoft)* The most immersive and ambitious Myst experience ever created. Bigger, better, and more innovative than any of the previous Myst adventures. Players will be part of an ever-expanding world that brings more areas to explore and more mysteries to solve.



Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic *(LucasArts)* It is the Golden Age of the Republic. The Galaxy is reeling from a recent conflict with the Dark Lords, and the ongoing battle between the Jedi and the Sith rages on. Your actions will decide the outcome of this war—and your destiny as a Jedi.

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CGW Top 20

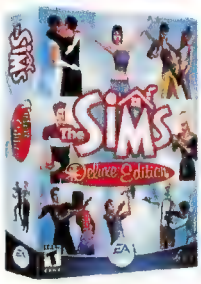
Wasted time well spent

Rank	Game	Rating
1	Call of Duty (Activision)	★★★★★
2	Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (Lucasarts)	★★★★★
3	Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of WWII (EA Games)	★★★★★
4	WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne (Vivendi/Blizzard)	★★★★★
5	Max Payne 2 (Rockstar)	★★★★★
6	Final Fantasy XI (Square Enix)	★★★★★
7	C&C Generals: Zero Hour (EA Games)	★★★★★
8	Lord of the Rings: Return of the King (EA Games)	★★★★★
9	Star Wars Galaxies (Sony Online/Lucasarts)	★★★★★

Rank	Game	Rating
10	Age of Mythology: The Titans (Microsoft)	★★★★★
11	Prince of Persia (Ubisoft)	NR
12	Tron 2.0 (Buena)	★★★★★
13	Freedom Fighters (EA Games)	★★★★★
14	Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 (Activision)	★★★★★
15	SimCity 4: Rush Hour (EA Games)	★★★★★
16	The Simpsons: Hit and Run (Vivendi)	★★★★★
17	XIII (Ubisoft)	★★★★★
18	Madden NFL Football 2004 (EA Games)	★★★★★
19	Midnight Club II (Rockstar)	★★★★★
20	Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna (Microsoft)	★★★★★

Survey results of games from the last six months. To vote, go to www.computergaming.com.

GREAT DEALS ON PC GAMES



The Sims Deluxe Edition
(Electronic Arts)

Includes The Sims, The Sims Living Large, and a host of all-new exclusive features in one Deluxe package.

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- Create any Sim you can imagine with the powerful Sims Creator
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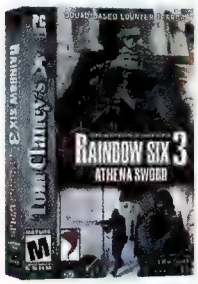

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword ***(Ubisoft)***

Expansion pack for Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield.

Features:
- 8 All-new mission campaign in locations from Italy and Croatia to Greece
- 3 new multiplayer game modes (Adversarial Terrorist Hunt, Adversarial Scattered Hunt and Capture the Enemy)
- 7 additional real-world weapons (for a total of 64)

Regular Price: ~~$29.99~~
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Lords of the Rings: Return of the King ***(Electronic Arts)***

The fate of Middle-earth is once again in your hands in the final installment of the block-buster movie trilogy.

Features:
- Multiple gameplay paths, taking control of the motion
- Exclusive voice-over by the actual actors from the films
- All-new multiplayer co-op mode will let players form their own Fellowship

Regular Price: ~~$39.99~~
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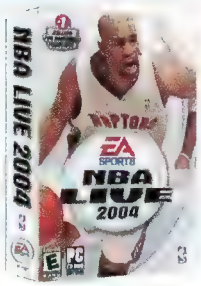

NBA Live 2004
(EA Sports)

With authentic gameplay, and stunning graphics, this game delivers the definitive basketball experience.

Features:
- Enhanced freestyle control using the right analog stick to express your game
- Run team-specific offensive and defensive sets with a single button
- Build a powerhouse dynasty

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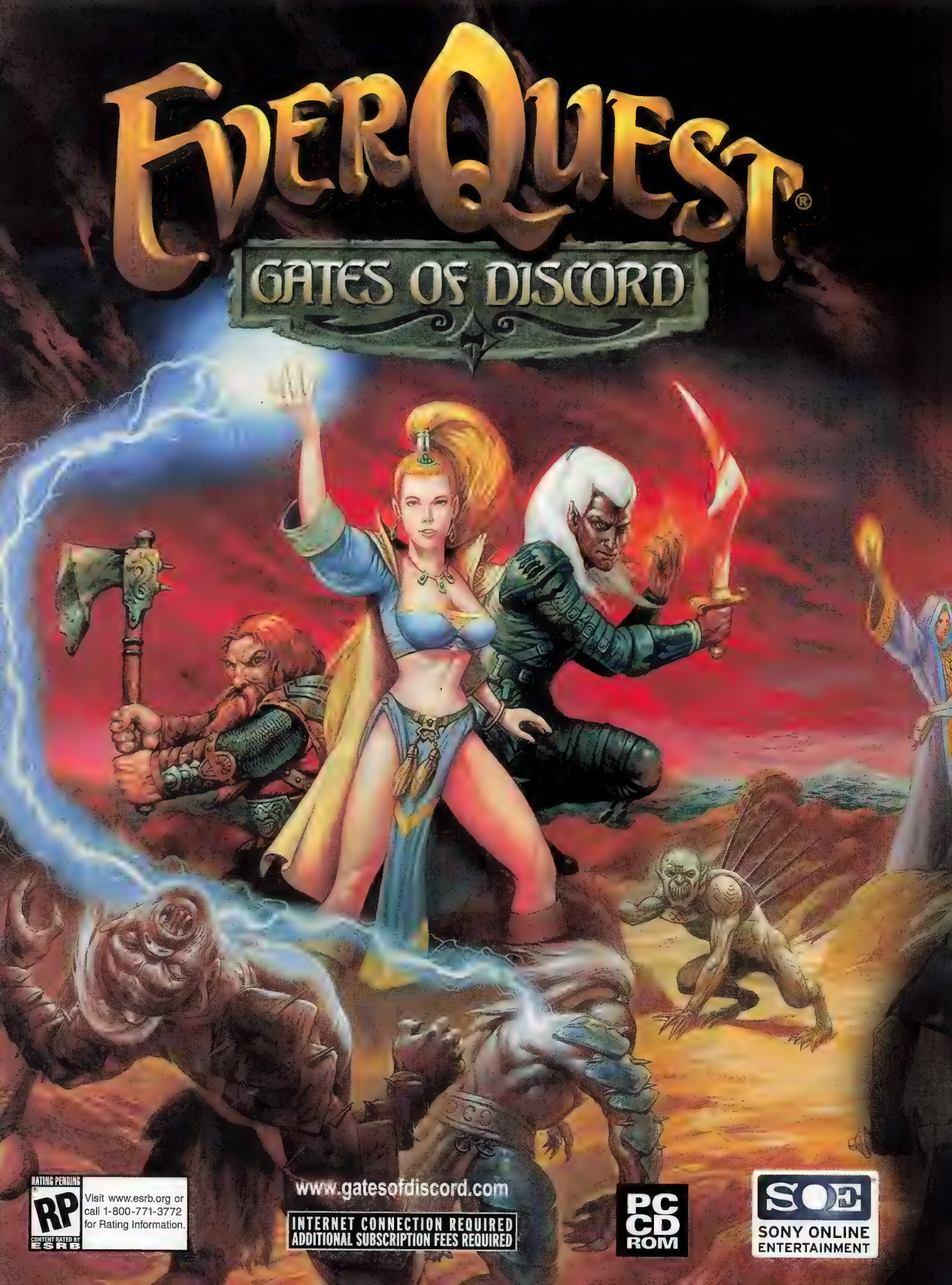
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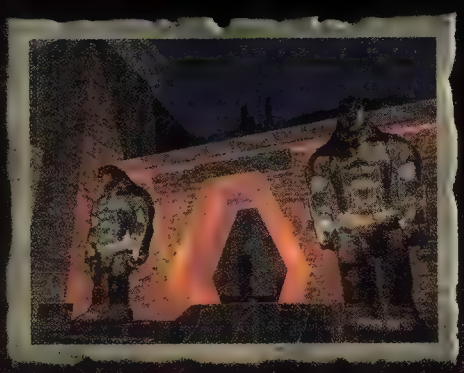

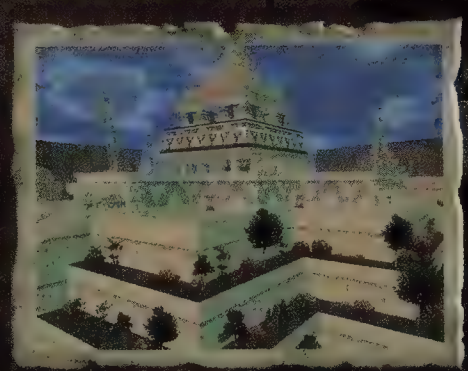

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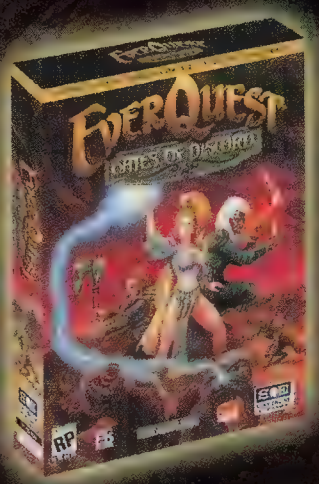

In Stores February 2004

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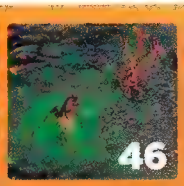
Inside



46 **Warlords Battlecry 3**
The sleeper hit RTS game of 2002 is back, with lots of new stuff.

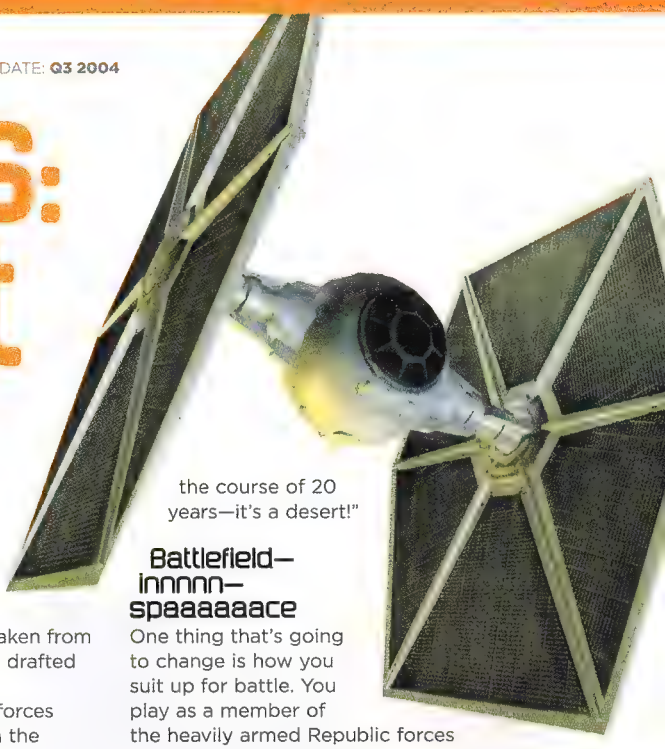
44 **Battlefield: Vietnam**
Prepare to go knee-deep in the s--t as we take a hands-on look at this FPS.

53 **Ground Control 2**
Can a tactical game actually look good *and* play well? You'll know soon enough.

PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** DEVELOPER: **Pandemic Studios** GENRE: **Battlefieldy shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Q3 2004**

Star Wars: Battlefront

More stars! More wars! Go figure



You've always dreamed of slipping on the shiny white metal jackboots of an Imperial stormtrooper, but fetishes aside, there's never been a proper chance to do frontline fighting as one in a game. That is, until now. Last month, we got you the scoop on the upcoming sci-fi-fueled, *Battlefield*-ish *Star Wars Battlefront*. Since then, we've actually had a chance to knock around an early PC build of the game—and to get some tasty screens for you in the process. The information below, however, will have to hold you over until a release date far, far away (late fall 2004).

On paper, it sounds like the game that *Galaxies* should have been. Instead of playing as the equivalent of some second-stringer telling you to "stay on target," you're one of the grunts down in the trenches, fighting this well-known interstellar war. OK, two well-known interstellar conflicts. You'll be able to relive battles from the original movies, but material is also taken from the new trilogy, since you're also drafted to fight in the *Clone Wars*.

For continuity's sake, Imperial forces won't be able to duke it out with the clone army, according to producer Jim Tso, so the entire game will be split into two time periods across 15-plus playable levels—Empire versus Rebellion and Republic versus Federation. There's no word on whether the maps will vary a whole lot, but as Tso says, "Not a whole lot is going to change on Tatooine over the course of 20 years—it's a desert!"

> **"Pandemic came to us with the idea to make a *Battlefield*-like game before there even was a *Battlefield*."**

Battlefield—innnnn—spaaaaaace

One thing that's going to change is how you suit up for battle. You play as a member of the heavily armed Republic forces or the heavy-metal droid army, and the Clone Wars are going to be hairy. Just strap into a gunship—this dreadnought seats one pilot, a co-pilot, a couple ball-turret gunners, and one side gunner. The AT-TE is the squat precursor to the AT-AT walkers. There are also the spider droids, two-wheeled Hailfire tanks, starfighters, and the imposing AATs that almost wiped out Jar-Jar in *The Phantom Menace* (sooo clooose, so very close). Granted we only fought in Naboo, but that's just a miniscule taste of things to come. The classic *Star Wars* trilogy will also be well

The pilot class is pretty useless without a ride.

As in *Battlefield*'s conquest mode, you want to hold checkpoints.

represented—if not a little lopsided. You see, the Empire has the leg up in firepower and numbers. For every X-wing, Y-wing, and snowspeeder the Rebellion has, the Empire has AT-STs, AT-ATs, TIE fighters, and TIE bombers. Yes, this is shaping up to be a nerd's dream come true.

It begs the question: Is this game just copying *Battlefield*'s style and throwing in popular sci-fi vehicles? Tso fesses up: "Pandemic actually came to us after working on Star Wars: The Clone Wars with an idea to make a game just about the battles [in the *Star Wars* universe]. Basically, it was a *Battlefield*-like game before there even was a *Battlefield*." Of course, *Star Wars* fans took some initiative of their own by working on the film-themed *Galactic Conquest* mod for *Battlefield 1942*. To which Tso adds, "The people obviously want the same thing we do—to be in the *Star Wars* universe. If we can't deliver a game better than the mod, we should all quit our day jobs."

Space exploitation

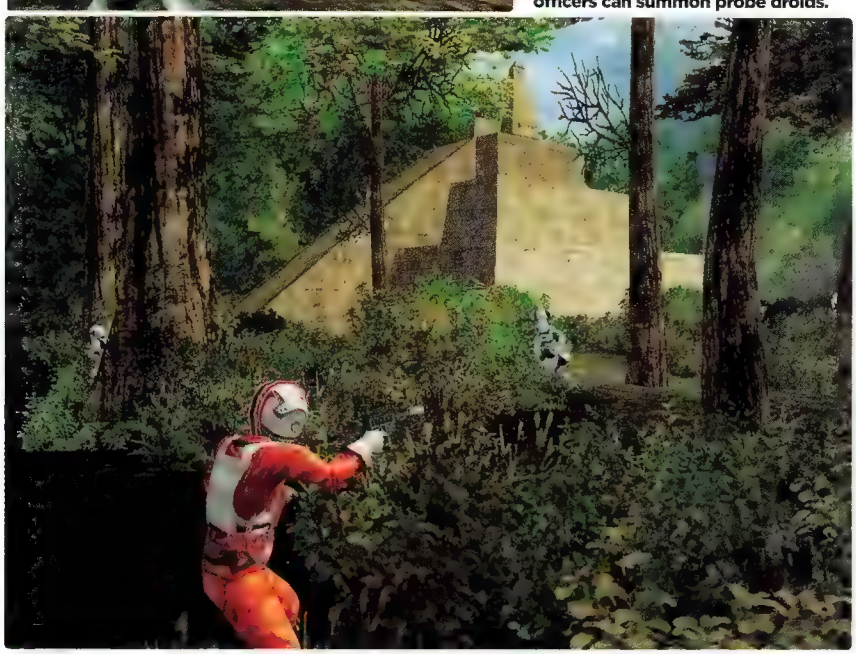
Considering the scope of the conquest mode, it looks like their positions are secure. Playing a more strategic angle, this multiplayer mode lets 32 players (Pandemic is working up to 64-player capabilities into LAN play) pick sides, and then, before combat, select planets to control. Kind of like *Risk*, sides alternate choosing among the 10 planets. The ultimate goal, obviously, is to own them all.

Though we don't have a final list of all the worlds to conquer, we can tell you that Naboo, Genosis, Camino, Tatooine, Yavin, Hoth ("We must have a Hoth battle in every *Star Wars* game," Tso jokes), and Endor are up for grabs. There's also word that a key world and battles from the upcoming *Episode III* will also be in the game. Some planets, such as Yavin and Endor, rely more on ground combat between soldiers, whether it's in jungles or the cities on Naboo. Other, more open battles, like ones on Hoth and Genosis, are more vehicle-centric. Now here's where it gets interesting: Depending on the planet you hold—and the time period you're fighting in—you get different bonuses for owning the different planets. If the imperials hold Endor long enough, you'll be the proud owner of a brand-spankin'-new Death Star. If the Republic maintains control of Camino, your clone army gets bonus units when going into battle. And this is saying nothing of the NPCs who will appear in battle. The famous faces of Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, and Count Dooku number among the bonus computer-controlled NPC troops that'll duke it out with you. Then, to add more flavor, you may run into some of the indigenous people of various worlds. Tso speaks of computer-controlled Tusken Raiders populating the Tatooine deserts and picking fights with anybody who comes near. There's also talk of the playful and oh-so-annoying Ewoks sneaking onto speederbikes on Endor. Please, please let there be Ewoks for us to stomp.

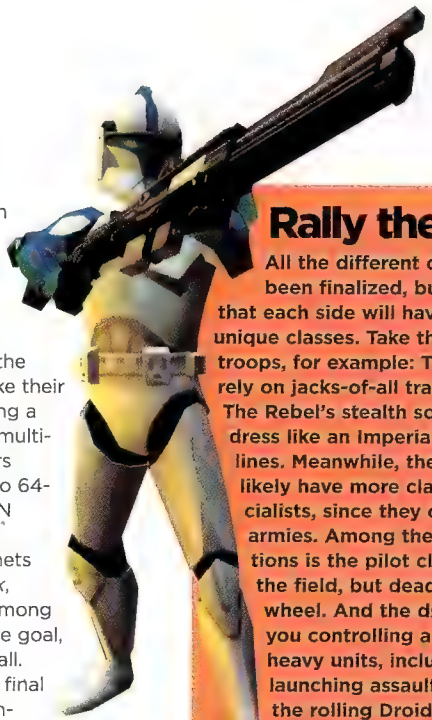
Tso promises that the maps themselves will hold more strategic elements as well. He uses Hoth as an example. There are consequences to losing command posts, so if the empire can take out the shield generators early enough, the rebels are toast. Conversely, if the rebels can hold the line, there are only so many reinforcements available for the imperial forces to draw from.

While Pandemic is also hard at work on PS2 and Xbox versions of the game, Tso says they want to make sure the PC version is a quality PC title in its own right and not a port. What we've knocked around is obviously early, but as of press time, we're about a year away from seeing the finished product. This taste of the Force is more than enough to keep us going until then. **Darren Gladstone**

AT-STs are fun, but imperial officers can summon probe droids.



"Tag—you're it!" A little fun and hijinks near a temple on a moon of Yavin.



Rally the troops

All the different classes haven't been finalized, but we do know that each side will have at least five unique classes. Take the Rebel troops, for example: They have to rely on jacks-of-all trades and spies. The Rebel's stealth soldier lets you dress like an Imperial behind enemy lines. Meanwhile, the Empire will likely have more classes and specialists, since they can churn out armies. Among the cooler innovations is the pilot class: useless in the field, but deadly behind the wheel. And the droid army has you controlling a number of heavy units, including rocket-launching assault droids and the rolling Droidica 'bots. Jim's favorite unit so far: the clone-army jump trooper, who uses a rocket-pack like Jango Fett.

The Word **STELLAR**

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MSI

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Digital Illusions CE Canada** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2004**

Battlefield: Vietnam

We love the smell of frags in the morning...

Digital Illusions CE's decision to go all Vietnam on us caused *Battlefield* vets to panic. Some felt *BF* wouldn't be the same if it were in a dense jungle, since tanks really can't drive through trees. Others worried that Vietnam wouldn't be done justice. Well, we've recently played *BF: Vietnam*. We're not worried, but you will want to kill Janis Joplin.

BFV isn't a happy middle ground between what's expected from a digital Vietnam War and what's expected from the next *Battlefield*. It is, instead, *BF: 1942* with new tricks, new art, and new tactics. Renaming it *Americans vs. Random Asian Nation in Some Jungle* wouldn't change anything. The tunnels and traps that were notorious during the Vietnam War have been overlooked, but what the heck. The *Battlefield* series isn't about realism—it's about mindless shooting. When was the last time you saw a sniper balancing on a plane's wing at 10,000 feet? Thought so.

So, what real changes are in store? For starters, you'll have to cope with some damn hippy music that was used to brainwash our nation's youth in the 1960s. These same tunes blare out during chopper and boat rides, announcing your presence to nearby friendlies—and psyching out the VC—making them stop and wonder, "Where da party at?"

It's the jungle that gives this game its biggest and most alluring twist.

Hey buddy, need a lift to the war zone?

Welcome to the jungle

It's the jungle that gives the game its biggest and most alluring twist. Long grass and an abundance of foliage make hiding a leafy breeze. Once you start going prone, enemies can't see you or your telltale nametags. The end result has a huge impact on gameplay.

Despite the new focus on flora, the base game still revolves around vehicles and stationary emplacements, although less of a focus is being put on armor. On-foot action has been refined, but not to the level that will please *Quake* diehards. With the exception of a scrapped medic class and reworked gun assignments, grunt play is very much akin to the original's. Choppers and comparatively small boats (some acting as mobile spawn points) play more significant roles in the action. Unlike *Joint Operations*' promise of a killing-machine-free vehicular system, *Vietnam*'s gas-powered beasts still toss out rockets and bullets. The choppers, capable of hoisting and swinging friendly tanks about the map, are critical transportation and support vehicles, while jets rain fiery hell from above. *Desert Combat* fans will recognize the control schemes for jets and choppers, and they should appreciate the extra armor the new flyers have. Us? We'll appreciate our shot at the war effort come this spring. **Ivan Sulic**

Just because you have the superior firepower doesn't mean you have the upper hand.

Name That Tune

Match the in-game music to the most appropriate vehicle.

SONGS	VEHICLES
A. The Kinks, "You Really Got Me"	1. Chinook
B. Bobby Fuller Four, "I Fought the Law"	2. Phantom
C. CCR, "Fortunate Son"	3. Vespa
D. Count Five, "Psychotic Reaction"	4. Huey Assault
E. Deep Purple, "Hush"	5. PBR

The Word: **STEAMY**

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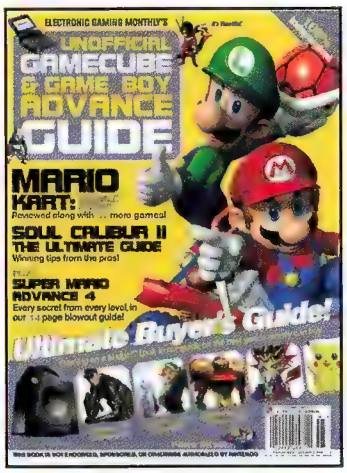
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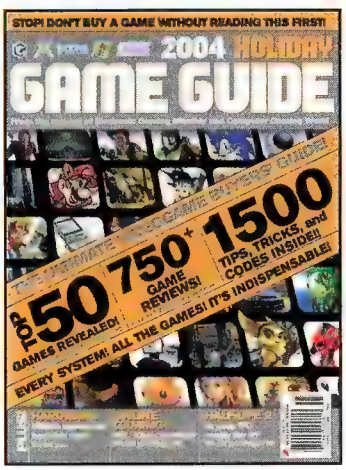
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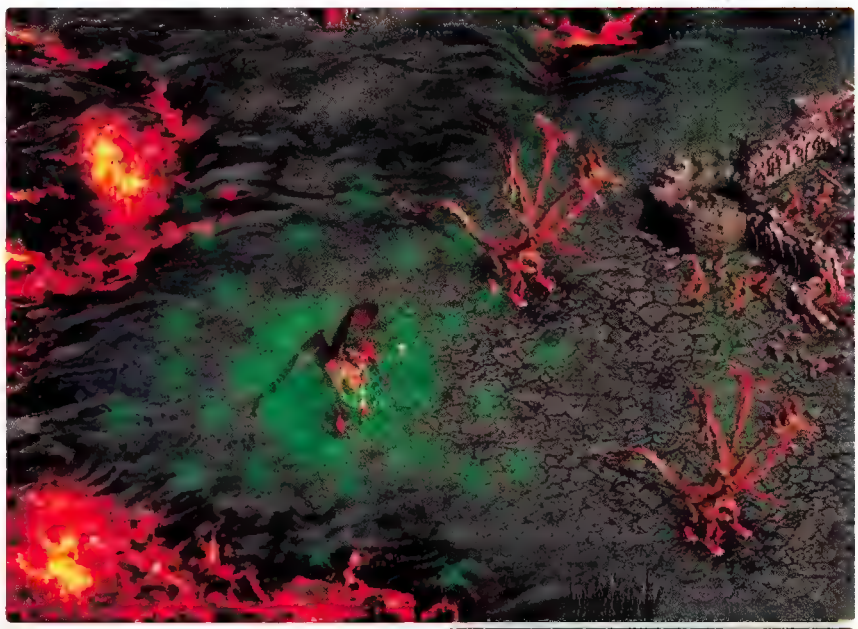
PUBLISHER: **Enlight Software** DEVELOPER: **Infinite Interactive** GENRE: **RTS** RELEASE DATE: **Q2 2004**

Warlords Battlecry III

Cry havoc and let loose the dogs of war

Talk about not getting enough credit. Of all the big real-time strategy franchises out there, *Warlords Battlecry* has to be the most underrated and overlooked. Spun off from the venerable *Warlords* series, the *Battlecry* games have been some of the best RTS games in years. Fortunately, it seems that we're not the only ones who think so, as the third installment is already well underway.

Although *Warlords Battlecry III* is based on the same engine as its predecessor, it now sports stronger A.I., larger characters, bigger battles, better graphical detail in both units and environments, and a darker, edgier interface. It also promises another fun, open-ended campaign structure similar to the one we saw in previous installments.



These volcanic environs are among some of the new lands to conquer.

Fresh to the fight

The game is loaded with a fistful of new features. For starters, three new types of terrain are available: fertile grasslands, harsh deserts, and lava-rich molten rock. Scattered throughout the terrain are shops where you can purchase valuable items, potions, and spells.

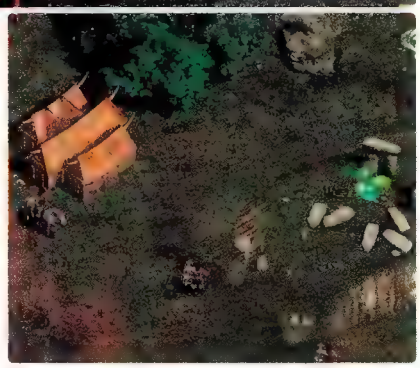
Of all the RTS franchises, *Battlecry* has to be the most underrated.

Of course, what good would that be without characters? There's good news on that front as well: *Battlecry III* gives players five new races to choose from. First up are the chameleonlike ssrathi, a tribal society of reptilian humanoids who employ powerful dinosaurs and shamanistic magic in combat. The insectoid swarm race consists of putrid scorpions, beetles, and other filthy vermin predisposed toward overpowering opponents with superior numbers of weak troops. Finally, there are the plaguelords, a disturbing mass of disease-bearing ghouls and demons who slowly whittle away the opposition with their infectious powers. Two new human factions—the magic-wielding empire and the cavalry-heavy knights—fight to keep these abysmal monsters at bay. Add to these the 11 surviving races from *Battlecry II* for a whopping total of 16 unique species. Not bad, eh?

Each race has its own unique units, including plenty of new options for the old races. Hero units get a particularly big boost in the form of a new hero-development system—your heroes can gain experience and level up during the game. Beyond giving players a high degree of control over how their units' statistics improve, *Battlecry III* presents a wide variety of skills based on the hero's race and class selection. Leveling should go quite a bit faster than in previous installments, although new levels now bring smaller increments of power—indeed, a level 100 hero here is equivalent to a level 40 hero from *Battlecry II*.

The other big change is the inclusion of lairs. These neutral structures routinely spawn packs of aggressive A.I.-controlled monsters, providing an extra bit of challenge in player-versus-player affairs. Destroying these lairs is not always a simple task, as they will spawn some pretty hefty defenses. High-level boss creatures emerge from destroyed lairs, and defeating them yields valuable experience and powerful magical items to bolster your forces.

Speaking of magic, there's plenty of that to be found—30 all-new spells are spread out among three different magical spheres. Divination spells, Poison magic, and the high-powered Arcane discipline give you tons of options if you're trying to draft a magic-heavy army. Elementalist mages specialize in commanding the forces of nature, channeling their energy into powerful creations of fire and ice. Defilers are crafty poisoners who wield noxious venom clouds and rotting magic that chisels away at their foes' life force.



Once again, it's time to colonize the untamed wilds.

Warlords Battlecry III certainly has a solid legacy to build upon. We were huge fans of the last game—it was a contender for Best RTS Game of 2002. If what we've seen so far is any indication of what we can expect, this just might be one of those rare worthwhile entries into an otherwise worn and overdone genre. **Ryan Scott**

The Word: **HEROIC**

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Painkiller

File this one under "not big on subtle." We could try to explain why you're fighting your way through purgatory—but why bother? Check out that porky hell biker getting knocked on his butt! He just got impaled by a shot from a stake gun and is now reeling from the blow. Off to the right, a Sado commando is ready to strike. Yep, this game looks twisted as hell, with a style all its own. Oh, and it's got a decent 3D engine to back it up. Look for frenzied, 32-player multiplayer matches online in early 2004.

CAUTION

PIPELINE

Ship dates and slip dates for games in the stream

Game	Developer	Expected
Advent Rising	Majesco Games	Q1 2004
Alias	Acclaim	February 2004
Atlantis Evolution	The Adventure Company	April 2004
The Bard's Tale	inXile Entertainment	2004
Battlefield: Vietnam	Electronic Arts	March 2004
Black & White II	Electronic Arts	June 2004
Bulletproof Monk	Empire Interactive	Q1 2004
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	Bethesda Softworks	February 2004
City of Heroes	NCsoft	March 2004
Codename: Panzers	CDV Software	Q1 2004
Counter-Strike: Condition Zero	Sierra	February 2004
Doom 3	Activision	April 2004
Dragon Empires	Codemasters	Q2 2004
DRIV3R	Atari	June 2004
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft	2004
Egyptian Prophecy	The Adventure Company	April 2004
EverQuest II	SOE	March 2004
Evil Genius	Vivendi Universal	Q3 2004
Fallout 3	Interplay	2004
Far Cry	Ubisoft	March 2004
FirstStrike: Grant City Anti-Crime	Hip Interactive	2004
Forever Worlds	The Adventure Company	March 2004
Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich	TBA	2004
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	2004
Gangland	Whiptail Interactive	February 2004
Ground Control 2: Operation Exodus	NDA Productions	Q2 2004
Guild Wars	NCsoft	2004
Half-Life 2	Vivendi Universal	April 2004
Hitman 3: Contracts	Eidos Interactive	April 2004
IL-2 Sturmovik: Forgotten Battles expansion	Ubisoft	Q1 2004
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	NovaLogic	February 2004
kill.switch	Hip Interactive	February 2004
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude	Sierra	Q3 2004
Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle	NCsoft	February 2004
LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth	Electronic Arts	June 2004
LOTR Online Trading Card Game	Decipher	2004
Lords of the Realm III	Sierra	February 2004
The Matrix Online	Ubisoft	2004

New Update

PUBLISHER **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Crytek** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE **Q1 2004**

Far Cry

Trouble in Paradise

F*ar Cry*? More like *Near Done.* Development has progressed swiftly across the sprawling jungles of *Far Cry*—from the multiple nonlinear paths you can combat your way through to the deft enemy A.I. Back in July 2003, we told you about charter boat operator Jack carver. Now, here's an update on this promising shooter.

Crytek, the German studio behind *Far Cry,* demonstrated a late alpha, pre-beta build that illustrated impressive draw distance and physics-coding implementation. Enemies flail in the oh-so-fashionable ragdoll style, but in a subtle improvement, fallen enemies don't collide and clip with one another; rather, they impressively pile atop one another.

Objects like a rusty oil drum can be knocked off a hill and sent barreling toward opponents below. As the barrel begins to teeter downward, one of the A.I.-controlled opponents surprisingly and desperately tries to push the can back up the hill to stave off death. It's a futile attempt that ends in pancake city.

When *Far Cry* is released in the first quarter of 2004, it will come packaged with the easy-to-use Sandbox map editor. Don't worry about brushing up on your programming chops here; this kit is as easy as running a paintbrush across a wall. When level designer Chris Auty used to make *Counter-Strike* maps, a 5-square-mile arena would take him up to a month. Thanks to Sandbox, he can easily create a level in a week.

All is not well on this island paradise.

"Basically, anyone can pick up the editor [Sandbox] and put down terrain, add A.I., vehicles, trees, and brushes, and create a level. The editor is stunningly simple to use and really powerful at the same time," says Auty. "[You will be] able to design the level and play it instantly. Sandbox gives you the ability to actually enter the game inside the editor and test what you have created; this is pretty useful when testing timing and layouts, and gives you instant feedback when you're designing."

While Sandbox is designed to have an inviting learning curve, the promised strength of the system has not been compromised. "There are a lot of cool features designed for more experienced users, too. We have a very powerful scripting language that can be edited in the tools, as well as a cut-scene editor for making in-game movies." **Johnny Liu**

The Word: NEAR

One evil henchman caught sleeping on the job—again.

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal** DEVELOPER: **Massive Entertainment** GENRE: **Real-time Tactics** RELEASE DATE: **Q2 2004**

Ground Control II: Operation Exodus

Real-time strategy gets down and dirty

Someone out there must really love harvesting coal and iron. How else can you explain the joy that is the modern real-time strategy game? Dig, mine, build, and then sometime before you die, wage war. Yawn. Thankfully, that hasn't been the case with the *Ground Control* series. It's billed as "real-time tactics," meaning you're assigned squads and immediately rolled into battle. It's been three years since the original, and *Operation Exodus* promises more of just about everything that made *Ground Control* so sweet: more tactics, more vehicles, more factions, and more graphical eye candy than you'd expect.

All the units look different and really sweet.

Roll out on a wide variety of terrain.

The first thing we noticed when Vivendi swung by our office recently was the incredible attention to detail. In the traditional "God's eye" view of the world, you can make out ripples and reflections in the water and see trees swaying to indicate a breeze (as well as wind direction, which comes into play later). But you can see that in any strategy title these days. Zooming in here, you can even make out the faces of the grunts in the field. In one example, senior producer Jose Aller garrisoned up a building, and when he zoomed in, we saw soldiers poking guns out of broken windows and aiming off into the distance. When we looked at a medium tank—one of the 48 units in the game—the commander's head was popping out (which improves the unit's accuracy but makes you more susceptible). While at first these details may seem to be there for effect only, they all actually add to the gameplay.

Vivendi has also been busy refining aspects of the original. You can now control individual units, if you want, or stick with squads. You can give orders as to where troops should go and the direction they should face upon arrival. Best yet, it's now possible to return fire as you retreat, you cowardly bastards. The 24-mission campaign looks huge (at least after seeing some of the volcanic-, tropical-, tundra-, and urban-themed maps), and you can tackle missions on your own or cooperatively over the Internet when you aren't having an eight-way deathmatch. Aller also says the development team is working on a scenario/map editor (although not yet final) that might ship prior to the game's launch.

The other big news is the announcement of a third faction, which will be sucked into the uncivil war between the Northern Star Alliance and the Terran Empire: the HR Giger–inspired Viron Nomads. While not much has been revealed about this wacky alien race, we can tell you that the idea is cool. Inspired by nano- and biotechnology, these creatures can meld together to create newer, more potent units. Merge a gas engineer vehicle with two assault troops and a thumper tank and *voilà*—you get a giant gas-bomb-spewing monstrosity! Just like dear old dad. **Darren Gladstone**

The Word: TACT-FULL

PIPELINE

Game	Developer	Expected
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault	Electronic Arts	March 2004
Men of Valor: Vietnam	Sierra	June 2004
Middle-earth Online	Vivendi Universal	September 2004
The Movies	Activision	June 2004
Mythica	Microsoft	October 2004
Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	Q4 2004
Pac-Man World 2	Hip Interactive	Q1 2004
Painkiller	DreamCatcher Interactive	March 2004
Priest	JC Entertainment	2004
Psychotoxic	CDV Software	2004
Quake IV	Activision	2004
Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword	Ubisoft	Q1 2004
Rise of Nations: Throne and Patriots	Microsoft	Q2 2004
Rome: Total War	Activision	Q3 2004
Sam & Max: Freelance Police	LucasArts	Q2 2004
Shade: Wrath of Angels	Cenega	2004
Silent Storm: Sentinels	Encore Software	2004
The Sims 2	Electronic Arts	March 2004
Soldner: Secret Wars	Encore Software	February 2004
SpellForce	Encore Software	February 2004
Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow	Ubisoft	March 2004
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Oblivion Lost	THQ	September 2004
Star Wars: Battlefront	LucasArts	Q2 2004
Supreme Ruler 2010	Strategy First	February 2004
Syberia II	Microids	Q2 2004
Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Sierra	November 2004
Thief III	Eidos Interactive	Q1 2004
Train Simulator 2	Microsoft	February 2004
Tribes: Vengeance	Sierra	Q4 2004
Trivial Pursuit Unhinged	Atari	March 2004
Ultima X: Odyssey	Electronic Arts	February 2004
Unreal II: The Awakening – Special Edition	Atari	February 2004
Unreal Tournament 2004	Atari	February 2004
Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines	Activision	June 2004
Vietcong: Fist Alpha	Gathering	Q1 2004
Warlords Battlecry III	Enlight Software	Q2 2004
Wartime Command: Battle for Europe 1939-1945	Codemasters	Q2 2004
World of WarCraft	Blizzard Entertainment	June 2004

New Update

DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

Games come from out of nowhere

FROM: **1C/Xbow Software** AVAILABILITY **April 2004**

Star Wolves

Word on the street: *Freelancer* whetted our appetites for interstellar intrigue...*Star Wolves* should sate it with a generous serving of sci-fi goodness. Space-faring bounty hunters assume command of a 22nd-century starfighter, then pursue a potential career as a mercenary or tradesman. Earn enough through these activities and you can upgrade and outfit your vessel, plus acquire up to six additional cruisers, assuming command of an actual convoy. Customizable skill sets further give this strategically sound role-playing game some character.

Sounds kinda beat: Much as we dig the pretty visuals and respectable premise, sales of space simulations of all stripes have petered. With interest in the topic flagging, so too have development budgets, leaving us dubious about whether the title can truly live up to its considerable potential. Given the game's intricate setup, the potential for a steep learning curve also exists, and the last thing poor, beleaguered end users need is another *Starfleet Command*. We're keeping our fingers crossed on this one.

FROM **Ascaron** AVAILABILITY: **June 2004**

Port Royale 2

Word on the street: The original is an engrossing yet often stuffy simulation of the business of piracy and privateering. For the sequel, developer Ascaron presents newcomers with a compromise, introducing a less-confusing play structure that offers optional missions, enhanced sea battles, and expanded town-building features. Trade plays as important a role as ever, although successful seafarers can also own land, construct production facilities, or terrorize villagers for kicks. Much-needed tutorial scenarios should shiver your timbers, too.

Sounds kinda beat: Cool it on hoisting the mainsail, landlubbers. The most satisfying pillage and plunder you'll see here involves separating the natives from their hard-earned doubloons. So rejoice, all you slimy expansionists. Tax-men-in-training may appreciate the gesture, but we're betting most don't have the stomach for the hardcore economic models churning away beneath the beautifully rendered waters of this crash course in 17th-century Caribbean capitalism.

FROM **Russobit-M** AVAILABILITY **March 2004**

Xenus

Word on the street: Money can't buy love, but it purchases almost anything else—playable vehicles, 20 different weapons, ammo, gas—in *Xenus*, a first-person shooter with role-playing pretensions. As unwitting hero Kevin Myers, you pursue the trail of your missing sister into the Colombian jungle, where dealing with NPCs ranging from guerrillas to government officials is almost as important as gunning down the natives. Sprawling landscapes, complex character interaction, and robust multiplayer support complement your newfound adventures in avarice.

Sounds kinda beat: Nothing screams authenticity like a bunch of Russians simulating the South American jungle. In-house reps are also focusing hype efforts on the product's custom-developed Vital Engine 2 software backbone—shouldn't they be pushing a seemingly much more intriguing feature set? All told, here's hoping this game doesn't prove too clever for its own good.

Editors' Choice Award Winner - ProMagix DX-W
PC Magazine, November 2003

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COMPUTER GAMING WORLD'S

2003 GAMES OF THE YEAR

By the Editors of CGW

The PC gaming event of 2003 is the one that didn't happen: On September 30, 2003, Valve Software did not release *Half-Life 2* as promised, thus depriving the gaming world of the one thing we had all—despite our varied interests and biases—united behind in excitement. Even our cousins here at the console gaming magazines grudgingly acknowledged that this was The Big One. Then it didn't happen. And it still hasn't.

The cool thing is that for PC gamers, it ended up not mattering a whole lot, because this was an incredible year. While recent years have seen a dearth of good Game of the Year candidates, 2003 proved to be a refreshingly frustrating opposite: There were more great games than we can possibly acknowledge here. In fact, it's impossible and pointless to speculate whether *Half-Life 2* would have run away with the awards had it shipped, because, well, we haven't played it yet. And those games that did win this year are all more than worthy. *Half-Life 2* would have had to be some kind of masterpiece, indeed, to have beaten the masterpiece that is our 2003 Game of the Year.

So, to both the winners and nominees, thanks for endless hours and sleepless nights of awesome entertainment. Now let's pass out some awards.

GAME OF THE YEAR

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS** DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**

NOMINEES **Call of Duty, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, Madden NFL 2004, Tron 2.0**

WE ADMIT IT: WE HAD OUR DOUBTS. After barely being able to stay awake during an E3 demo of the game last May (which, in retrospect, we blame on booze)—and, more crucially, after learning it was to arrive on the Xbox before the PC—we began to wonder if BioWare was really going to deliver on *Knights of the Old Republic*. Were the makers of the *Baldur's Gate* games and *Neverwinter Nights* really going to be able to translate their RPG expertise to the *Star Wars* universe? And what was up with it looking more like a console action game than a PC RPG? Was this going to be yet another game that started development on the PC, moved to the consoles, and then lost its relevance to PC gamers along the way?

So, as we unequivocally hand over the Game of the Year trophy to this absolutely brilliant gem of a game, the first thing we want to say to BioWare is this: We are sorry. We never should have doubted you.

With *Knights of the Old Republic*, BioWare took everything it's learned about RPGs and game design over the years and upped the ante threefold with better presentation, better gameplay, and better storytelling, creating a game that is as entertaining and deep and accessible to both casual and hardcore gamers alike as any we've seen in years. At root, it's as complex an RPG as BioWare's classic *Dungeons & Dragons* games (with a combat system based on the same basic rules), but it has been polished to such a high sheen in terms of both appearance and mechanics that it has appeal far beyond the traditional RPG crowd. Indeed, this is the first RPG in years that has the entire *CGW* staff—not just RPG geeks like Jeff and Robert—hooked.

The fact that BioWare has done this with the *Star Wars* franchise—a license that, frankly, has seen much better days—is even more remarkable. LucasArts owes a huge thank-you to BioWare for restoring intelligence, passion, and humor to a franchise that, in the recent movies at least, seemed to forget what made it popular in the first place. Though set thousands of years before the time of the films, *Knights of the Old Republic* does a better job than the *Episode 1* and *2* films put together in telling a story worthy of the *Star Wars* name, with a compelling plot, a host of memorable characters,

PAST WINNERS

2002	Grand Theft Auto III (Rockstar)
2001	Operation Flashpoint (Codemasters)
2000	The Sims (EA)
1999	Unreal Tournament (Epic)
1998	Half-Life (Sierra)
1997	Jedi Knight (LucasArts)
1996	Diablo (Blizzard)
1995	Gabriel Knight 2 (Sierra)
1994	X-COM (Microprose)
1993	Doom (Id Software)
1992	Links 286 Pro (Access)
1991	Civilization (Microprose)
1990	Wing Commander (Origin)
1989	Railroad Tycoon (Microprose)
1988	SimCity (Maxis)
1987	Empire (Interstel)
1986	Earl Weaver Baseball (EA)
1985	Ultima IV (Origin)
1984	Kampgruffe (SSI)

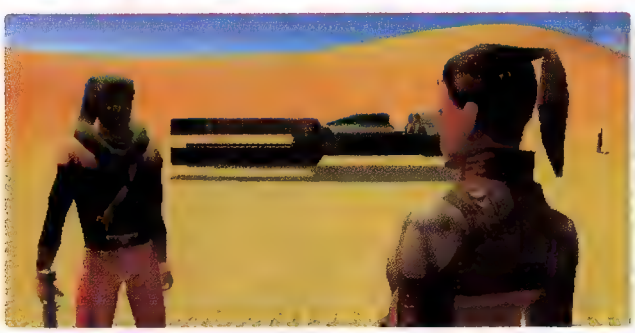
awesome voice acting, a steady stream of compelling quests, and, as a bonus somewhere beyond the halfway point, one of the most brutal and surprising plot twists ever seen in a videogame.

For PC gamers who patiently awaited the game's release after an initial Xbox launch, there has been much reason to rejoice. Rather than releasing the typical sloppy console port, BioWare went out of its way to please the PC crowd. Not only is there a (small) new area to explore, but all the controls are also perfectly retrofitted for mouse/keyboard, and the higher-resolution graphics are far more beautiful than what you'd see on a TV, without overtaxing our machines. It's a model of how to port a game.

There were plenty of other awesome PC games this year, for sure. Other titles that made our short list for Game of the Year included *Call of Duty, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, Tron 2.0*, and one very loud, insistent vote (from Wil) for *Madden NFL 2004*. In another year, any one of these games might have won and been worthy. But not this year. This year we agreed that no other game came close to matching the staggering, transcendent experience of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. It's the RPG for non-RPG fans, the *Star Wars* game for *Star Wars* haters, and the game that (as if we needed more proof) definitively cements BioWare's status as one of the most talented, ambitious, and artistically successful game companies this industry has ever seen.

In a stellar year for PC games, *Knights of the Old Republic* still manages to rise head and shoulders above the rest, and is unequivocally, resoundingly, CGW's Game of the Year for 2003.

FOR PC GAMERS WHO PATIENTLY AWAITED THE GAME'S RELEASE AFTER AN INITIAL XBOX LAUNCH, THERE HAS BEEN MUCH REASON TO REJOICE.



STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR

AGE OF WONDERS SHADOW MAGIC

PUBLISHER GATHERING DEVELOPER TRIUMPH STUDIOS

NOMINEES Rise of Nations, Galactic Civilizations, Railroad Tycoon 3, Dominions II

TALK ABOUT JUMPING INTO THE WAY-BACK MACHINE—all but two contenders for Strategy Game of the Year are turn-based, and both real-time entrants either borrow from turn-based gaming or just feel slow enough to be turn-based. And could the turn-based titles be any more old school? What the hell happened in strategy gaming this year?

Not a whole lot, actually, and that's why this year's Strategy contest was both indifferently and hotly contested. Nothing here really blew us away, but each of these titles managed to make a strong, good impression. *Galactic Civilizations* is the best 4X game of the year—well, it was until *Dominions II* came out. Neither title enjoyed the support of a big publisher, but still, we found it impossible to ignore the almost overwhelming depth of strategy they both offer. Ultimately, though, a profound lack of accessibility kept *Dominions II* out of the winner's circle, while *GalCiv*, as great as it is, feels too much like the space conquest of old.

That overfamiliarity did in *Railroad Tycoon 3* as well. While PopTop Software has done an amazing job updating this venerable series, we still felt like we had played this game before.

So, why pick another *Age of Wonders* sequel over the admittedly innovative *Rise of Nations*? That's precisely the discussion we had—after the votes were tallied, those two games were in a dead heat. We love *Rise of Nations*—we love the borders, we love the multiplayer, we love the single-player campaign and the special cards, we love taking over enemy cities, we even love all 58 gazillion research items. But while it's not a blatant clone of some other game (hi there, *Lords of EverQuest*!), *Rise of Nations* still feels a lot like most every other "lasso a bunch of units" RTS, although more refined. *Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic* feels unique. And it feels like at least two or three enormous games packed into one. This game is the most accessible in the series—and the deepest as well. With a three-tiered game world and each level encompassing sweeping maps, *Shadow Magic* feels truly epic while at the same time managing to feel tremendously personal, both through the hero and unit advancement and the tactical battles. And those tactical battles, especially the city sieges...man alive, are they compelling (and well-fought, thanks to the brutal A.I.). Bottom line: Of all the strategy games we played this year, *Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic* is the only one with the "just one more turn" addictiveness that distinguishes the best of the best.

SPECIAL AWARD

NPC OF THE YEAR

HK-47, Knights of the Old Republic

Forget those wimps C3PO and R2D2. The best *Star Wars* droid ever is now a snarky, sarcastic, and deadly assassin by the name of HK-47, the most memorable of *KOTOR*'s stellar lineup of NPCs. On the other hand, what do we know? As HK-47 would say, we're just organic meatbags.

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Computer and video game ratings have two parts: **rating symbols**, which tell you what age group the game is appropriate for and **content descriptors**, which tell you about specific content elements that may be of interest or concern.

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ESRB

ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE RATING BOARD

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ON FRONT

ON BACK

ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR

PRINCE OF PERSIA
THE SANDS OF TIME

PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT**

NOMINEES GTA: Vice City, Beyond Good & Evil, The Simpsons: Hit & Run, Splinter Cell

THERE IS SOMETHING PURELY MYSTICAL ABOUT *PRINCE OF PERSIA:* *The Sands of Time*. Like some rich Eastern tapestry, this is a carefully woven tale threaded between action and puzzles, pulled taut by the Prince's endearing narrative in an authentic Arabian-European accent. His monologues cleverly involve you with his character, from his annoyances with Princess Farra to the horrors of the sand demon legions.

From the first moment you find yourself in the center of a battle, surrounded by the rubble of a destroyed palace and lit by the volleys of blazing projectiles, something strikes you inside. It's a feeling that captivates and transports you, leaving you gaping in misty-eyed wonder at this faraway land across the desert, armed with nothing but your wits and an arsenal of acrobatic skills you effortlessly control. We don't know how a prince would know so many circus tricks, but this guy can catch serious air as he runs along walls, flipping and diving with the greatest of ease. *Sands of Time* is also the first game truly to nail time control and make it fun. You might expect the maneuvers to get tired, but the intelligent level design keeps confronting you with new ways to meet the challenges. The game isn't just about using those same moves, but also about finding new combinations in which to use them.

2003 was a golden year for action games. We were so inundated with strong candidates that we had to separate them into two categories: action and shooters. Interestingly, all of the action games were also all on consoles. It's a trend often decried by PC fans, but the truth is that we wouldn't have many of these games if not for the console market.

All of this year's action game nominees are standouts. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* is a towering commercial and critical success that greatly improved on its Game of the Year predecessor. *Beyond Good & Evil* is stylish, distinctive, and loaded with personality. *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* infuses a *GTA3*-style game with the TV show's talented writers and actors to yield the funniest *Simpsons* game yet. And *Splinter Cell* has stunning lighting effects to complement its stealth tactics. But none of these games cast a spell on us like *Prince of Persia*.

From its gorgeous graphics to its mesmerizing level design, rich storytelling, and outrageous character animations, all of the game's elements combine into something greater than the sum of its parts. Truly unforgettable.

SPECIAL AWARD: BEST WEAPON

Dagger of Time, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

This handy bit of cutlery puts the Rewind button on your TiVo onto one kick-ass blade. Nothing's better than hopping over a foe, shiving him in the back, and leaving him frozen in time, or being able to rewind and undo your last boneheaded maneuver when you screw up a jump (not that we ever do).

FLIGHT SIMULATION OF THE YEAR

FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2004: A CENTURY OF FLIGHT

PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** DEVELOPER: **MICROSOFT**

NOMINEES **Full Canvas Jacket for Red Baron II, Lock On: Modern Air Combat, IL-2 Sturmovik: Forgotten Battles**

ALL THE DETAILS FALL TOGETHER IN *FS2004: A CENTURY OF FLIGHT*, the first release in this venerable series that convincingly re-creates the entire flying experience. It sports authentic terrain covering the entire Earth's surface, thousands of airports, and stunningly realistic weather based on actual current conditions. Air traffic control is smarter and flight model feel has lost its artificial touch. Though the addition of some fascinating planes—including the Spirit of St. Louis and the DC-3 airliner—is welcome, it's Microsoft's support of third-party add-ons that's key to *FS2004*'s appeal. There are thousands of high-quality add-on aircraft, commercial and freeware, from airliners like the DC-4 and Airbus A380 to fighters like the XP-38 and F-16 to fantasy craft like the Millennium Falcon and a giant flying pumpkin. High-detail add-on scenery covers much of the world, and you can add A.I. air traffic covering airlines from Jet Blue to Air New Zealand. On a high-end system, you can have dozens of aircraft in the pattern around a crowded airport, all flying over photo-real terrain. Out of the box, it's an excellent flight sim. Download a few add-ons and it's an amazing simulator of the entire world of aviation.

MMORPG OF THE YEAR

TOONTOWN ONLINE

PUBLISHER: **DISNEY ONLINE** DEVELOPER: **DISNEY VR STUDIOS**

NOMINEES PlanetSide, Final Fantasy XI

THE ONLINE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER GENRE IS STILL A REVOLUTION WAITING TO HAPPEN. We know, we keep saying this, but it continues to be true. Everyone keeps trying, but no one is really coming up with a model that strays very far from the one already mastered by games like *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*. The two biggest, most promising attempts—*The Sims Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*—are not living up to expectations. Will they get better? We hope so.

This year did see a few cool new titles. *Final Fantasy XI* is an absolutely gorgeous game, and has succeeded in drawing lots of new gamers, including the vast console gaming crowd that hadn't yet tried the genre. Sony Online's *PlanetSide* is the year's most original massively multiplayer game and great fun for those who groove on large-scale battles. The only problem? Games like *Battlefield 1942* offer similar thrills for a lot less money per month. But *PlanetSide* the best massively multiplayer game of the year for those who have no interest in the one we're about to award.

And that would be Disney's *Toontown Online*. You need to be a parent or a preteen to appreciate it fully, but what Disney accomplished was pure brilliance—a massively multiplayer game with the perfect balance between solo play and group dynamics, in a unique, vibrant (and safe) online game world. With a interface, fun quest structure, and endless variety of activity, *Toontown* is the one MMORPG that all MMORPG makers should be playing and studying. A word of warning: It will turn your kid into a gaming zombie like the rest of u

SHOOTER OF THE YEAR

CALL OF DUTY

PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION** DEVELOPER **INFINITY WARD**

NOMINEES **Max Payne 2, Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield, Tron 2.0, Freelancer**

***CALL OF DUTY* WON THIS CATEGORY WITHOUT A SHOT FIRED—** there simply was no debate. There was one lone vote for *Tron 2.0*, but it was made more in the spirit of recognizing *Tron*'s innovation and stunning design. No one was willing to put forth—or even listen to—an argument that another game was better.

From the first American levels to the climactic Russian missions at Red Square and Berlin, *Call of Duty* piles one intense, electrifying moment after another into an exhilarating warlike experience. It achieves this with good level design and tough A.I., but all of the nominees have that. What makes *COD* stand out is its huge numbers of combatants, its cinematic scenes, its lightning pace, and the overall sense that you are a part of something epic. It makes *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* seem simplistic by comparison.

You can quibble with *Call of Duty*'s length, linearity, and lack of a cohesive story, but the game more than overcomes these with the best depiction of combat ever seen on the PC. It's not always realistic—there weren't many chase scenes in WWII, but those chases were among the most exciting levels in the game. The amazing audio prompted one editor to remark, "It sounds like they recorded actual weapons being fired into sides of beef."

The game reaches a terrifying crescendo in the Russian campaign, where it's hard to pick one best level among so many greats. We had a long debate trying to choose the best one before giving up and concluding that the whole Russian campaign was the highlight. We'll never forget crossing the Volga under deafening gunfire, running through Red Square looking for a rifle, or seeing German soldiers bludgeon our comrades with the butts of their rifles. It's simply one intense scene after another.

Max Payne 2 and *Rainbow Six 3* are very good games in their own right, but both offer only incremental improvements over their predecessors. *Freelancer* dazzled us with its immersive interstellar world, wild combat, and ambitiously open-ended design, but it can't compete with the cinematic spectacle of Europe at war. (Categorizing it as a shooter may seem odd, but the space-sim category isn't what it used to be, and we felt it was more shooter-like than the amorphous action games category.)

In the end, the only question was whether *Call of Duty* should be Game of the Year. In any other year, it could have been. Mission accomplished, Infinity Ward.

SPECIAL AWARD: BEST SOUND

Call of Duty

Anyone who's seen *Saving Private Ryan* will attest to the contribution that sound played in the opening sequence. The same is true for the sound in *Call of Duty*. Whether it's bullets whizzing by, shells exploding, or the low-end rumbling of an enemy tank as it approaches, the game's audio is just as impressive as its visuals.

WARGAME OF THE YEAR

KORSUN POCKET

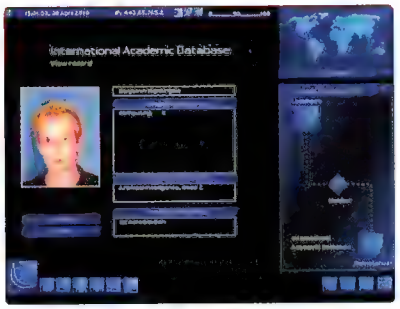
PUBLISHER MATRIX GAMES DEVELOPER STRATEGIC STUDIES GROUP

NOMINEES Highway to the Reich

AS WAR GAMES HAVE BECOME MORE OF A NICHE, their audience has had to depend on developers limited by tiny budgets and at times archaic conventions. While previous years have seen some of these conventions shattered, this year's winner takes the prize by perfecting the old standards that have anchored the genre since its halcyon days.

Korsun Pocket is everything a hardcore war gamer could ask for. Its genius is that it takes the sequential-move, odds-based, hex-regulated model and puts it on the PC in such an accessible format that players experience all the advantages of the computer presentation with none of the drawbacks. The core design is as outstanding as the interface and presentation, and the A.I. demolishes the myth that war games can't put up a decent fight against a human opponent.

While *Highway to the Reich* shows that war gaming is moving in exciting new directions, *Korsun Pocket* reminds us that the hobby's fundamentals remain a compelling model for gameplay, and—in the hands of the right developer—an irresistible one.



OK, FIRST OF ALL: IS *UPLINK* AN ADVENTURE GAME? Maybe not. The game's developer, Introversion Software, describes it as a "simulated hacking tool." Other gaming media have listed it as a strategy game. But whatever. One of the things we love about *Uplink* is that it really is kind of its own unique little beast. It gets our Adventure Game of the Year award because in our minds, it's done the best job of doing what the best adventure games always do: immersing us in a good story and giving us some good puzzles to get our brains moving. *Uplink* puts you in the role of a fledgling agent for an underground hacking network, receiving an increasingly difficult array of assignments that involve breaking in to computer systems around the world to steal, change, erase, and sabotage data. The best thing about it is its lo-fi presentation: It's all done at a computer console, as if you're really hacking. An immersive, original, and suspenseful little game.

ADVENTURE GAME OF THE YEAR

UPLINK: HACKER ELITE

PUBLISHER STRATEGY FIRST DEVELOPER INTROVERSION SOFTWARE

NOMINEES Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon, Dark Fall, SpongeBob SquarePants: Employee of the Month

EXPANSION PACK OF THE YEAR

BATTLEFIELD 1942: SECRET WEAPONS OF WORLD WAR II

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS DEVELOPER DIGITAL ILLUSIONS

NOMINEES Neverwinter Nights: Shadows of Undrentide, WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne, Command & Conquer Generals: Zero Hour, Medieval Total War: Viking Invasion

2003 WAS THE YEAR OF *BATTLEFIELD.* If not for EA managing to crank out two expansions within 12 months then for the fact that everybody and their mother is copying *Battlefield*'s lead—but they all stack up as penny ante mods when compared to what *Secret Weapons* provides. This expansion stands out as a whole new experience by adding new vehicles, tactics, and more depth to an already great game. Yes, the experimental vehicles are nice, and we really appreciate the addition of an objective-based mode, but the mobile spawn points—the C-47 transport planes—really alter the way you play. It's good to see that the folks at Digital Illusions didn't rest on their laurels when putting together this add-on. Here's hoping equally great (if not better) things will come out of *Battlefield: Vietnam* in time for next year's awards ceremonies.

SPORTS GAME OF THE YEAR

MADDEN NFL 2004

PUBLISHER: EA SPORTS DEVELOPER: ELECTRONIC ARTS

NOMINEES Tiger Woods Golf, NHL 2004, NBA Live 2004, Championship Manager

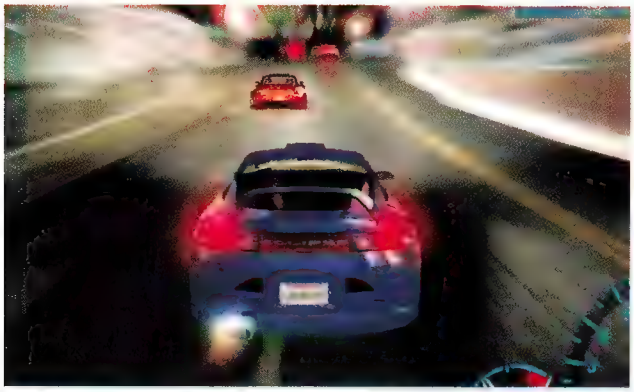
WHILE THE EASILY EXCITABLE WILLIAM O'NEAL loudly and proudly proclaims *Madden 2004* to be the best overall game of 2003, the most he could get the rest of *CGW* to agree with is that it's the best sports game of the year—which it most definitely is, by a wide margin. In years past, *Madden* has played a lot like a great game that doesn't completely live up to its potential, so if the running game was tight, the passing game sucked. Not so in 2004. This year, EA Sports created a game that plays evenly whether you're running the ball or tossing it. And in an attempt to mix things up even more, EA introduced Playmaker Control. Easily the feature that separates the boys from the wimps, Playmaker allows you to control "off-the-ball" players. If you're quarterbacking, you can control one of your receivers mid-route. And during running plays, you can now control your closest blocker. Kudos to EA for continuing to improve a product for which there is essentially no competition.

RACING GAME OF THE YEAR

NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND

PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS DEVELOPER: ELECTRONIC ARTS

NOMINEES F1 Formula Challenge



THERE'S NO MISTAKING THE UNDENIABLE STYLE in *Need for Speed Underground*. It may not be a conventional racing title like a *NASCAR* or *F1* title, but no other game will make you feel the Gs at every turn like *NFSU* does. The arcade-y physics combined with tight visuals leave you crashing into the sidewalls, and when the glossy neon lights aren't distracting you, the fantastic special effects always help convey white-knuckle speed.

Unlike other racing games, *Need for Speed* also introduces some seriously innovative race modes. Whether you're drifting around closed courses, tearing down city streets in the middle of the night, or drag racing, all the different ways that you can play (and trick out your car) keep you hooked long after you've crossed the finish line.

PUZZLE GAME OF THE YEAR

BOOKWORM

PUBLISHER: POPCAP GAMES DEVELOPER: POPCAP GAMES

NOMINEES Rocket Mania, Zuma

THIS LITTLE WORM IS A DISEASE, a green carrier that unleashed a complete and utter obsession upon the good office of *CGW*, ensnaring us in a diabolical burrow of literacy and learning. The insidious four-eyed annelid of the game's namesake implored us to keep spelling words, words we never even knew existed. This may sound corruptively educational, but once you've found out "nog" is a word, you'll find yourself powerless to resist discovering more.

The game's deceptively simple design—a combination of *Scrabble* and *Bejeweled*—not only brought us to our knees, it also infected our spouses and friends. There were many tales of non-gaming spouses refusing to shut off the PC at 3 a.m. Jeff Green missed a game demo in the conference room adjacent to his office while sounds of *Bookworm* filtered through the wall.

Actually, let's hail PopCap in its entirety, evil rulers of the PC puzzle world. Everything the PopCap folks put their diabolical minds to has become pure time-sucking gold. From *Bejeweled* to *Rocket Mania* to *Zuma*, PopCap has constantly found new ways to spell "addiction." They're like some kind of digital age drug dealer, clothed in cute and happy coats. The Technicolor overtones hide how truly wicked they are for stealing our precious hours away. The people there ought to be "quod" up for their crime against productivity.

PopCap's ultimate achievement is in taking simple elements that anyone can learn and turning them into raging, overwhelming obsessions. It's something commercial games with 50 times the budget (hey, *Deus Ex 2*!) often can't match.

HARDWARE OF THE YEAR

ATHLON 64 FX-51

MANUFACTURER: **AMD**

NOMINEES Creative Decoder DDTS-100, Microsoft Wireless Optical Desktop Elite, Intel i875 Chipset

IN THE WAR FOR CPU DOMINANCE, it's an understatement to say that AMD has been fighting an uphill battle; Intel has long dominated AMD in both performance and perception. In its attempt to eke out a slice of the CPU pie, AMD has dabbled in everything from goofy naming schemes to an ill-fated attempt to "debunk the MHz myth" that has been Intel's bread and butter. Well, it seems that all AMD really needed to do was design a processor that's simply faster than the best Intel has to offer. And that's exactly what AMD achieved with the 64-bit Athlon 64 FX-51.

The Athlon FX-51 boasts an integrated memory controller and supports DDR400, which gives it better memory efficiency and bandwidth. The FX-51 has superior gaming performance over the 3.2GHz Intel Pentium 4 Extreme Edition—it's no wonder that most of the systems in our Ultimate Gaming Machine story were based on the Athlon 64, and the three fastest rigs all rocked the FX-51.

While 64-bit gaming—as well as Microsoft's next OS, the 64-bit Longhorn—is somewhere off in the horizon, the Athlon 64's stellar 32-bit performance makes future-proofing easy. You've got great performance now, and you're well poised for Longhorn down the road.

SPECIAL AWARD

HARDWARE DESIGN

After dealing with hulking monoliths for 10 years, in 2003, we finally saw a breakout new design achieve widespread popularity. The small form-factor PC, pioneered and perfected by Shuttle, has become the darling of boutique PC builders. While the technology is still not perfect—the cramped innards and tiny power supplies limit the upgradeability of these systems—they're a LAN gamer's dream. And they look cool, too.

BEST TREND

UPGRADEABLE GAMING LAPTOPS

We've been begging for this for years. Plenty of laptops are great for gaming, but no one wants to drop $3,000 on a machine that will be obsolete in a year. Mobile chips from ATI and Nvidia have modules that can be upgraded, but laptop makers were loath to open that can of worms. Alienware took the first step that others inevitably followed. Now Voodoo and Dell offer laptops with upgradeable graphics chips.

COASTER OF THE YEAR

STAR WARS GALAXIES: AN EMPIRE DIVIDED

PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS** DEVELOPER: **SONY ONLINE**

NOMINEES Enter the Matrix, Postal 2, Mistmare, Contract J.A.C.K., Lionheart

WHILE WE ARE NORMALLY NOT ADVOCATES OF INFANTICIDE here at *CGW*, we like to think that we have the good of mankind at the forefront of our transplanted monkey minds, and with that heartfelt concern guiding our every word and action, we humbly suggest that the digital babies of certain developers should be abandoned in the hot and dusty wilderness, to be abducted and rent asunder by dingoes. Pile 'em up like cord wood and let the dogs have 'em, every godforsaken, misbegotten one of 'em.

But which game should top our pile of woe, to be certain it will be taken? Ah, there lies the rub, for it's hard to recall a time with so many worthy candidates. After all, this was the year that saw the first two zero-star reviews in *CGW*, and while no amount of fruit sorbet will ever cleanse our palate of the fecal taco that is *Postal 2*, it's not like we didn't see that shambling dungheap coming from a mile away. And *Mistmare* was so thoroughly bungled, it actually managed to entertain us...by allowing us to ridicule it pitilessly. If there's one thing we love at *CGW*, it's a victim.

Contract J.A.C.K.? A 15-yard snot rope, to be sure, but our defiant love of the *NOLF* franchise keeps it from the top of the crap pile. *Lionheart* was as pleasant as a serrated foot-long catheter, and *Enter the Matrix* took whatever love the Wachowksi brothers hadn't killed and stomped it dead—in slooooowww motion.

No, it was *Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided* that vaulted to the pinnacle of this year's game garbage and clung to the top spot with a vigor that is so woefully absent in the game itself. So relentlessly inert it makes Hayden Christensen's Anakin seem spastic, *Galaxies* is a soulless compendium of game design theories masquerading as entertainment. It is utterly bereft of the action, thrills, and intrigue that used to typify the *Star Wars* universe. Instead, gamers are expected to shiver in excitement over the opportunity to make shoes and sports bras for other players. Compounding the *EverQuest* incessant Boredom Mandate so rigidly enforced at Sony Online, *SWG* requires players to heal by sitting down and watching other players punch hotkeys under the pathetic delusion they are "performing." No, they're paying $15 a month to press F12. Was there anything more mean-spirited in gaming in 2003 than *Galaxies*' Jedi policy, making becoming a Jedi nigh on impossible, then rewarding the one or two lucky shut-ins that actually become Force-sensitive with permanent character death after months of misguided devotion?

Galaxies was inarguably the biggest disappointment of the year, a potentially great game transformed into a pay-as-you-go force-feeding of dirt, and that, my friends, makes it Coaster of the Year.

SPECIAL AWARD

RUNNER-UP COASTER

CGW's January DVD

OK, we get it: Not everybody has a DVD drive. Still, you could potentially use our January DVD—complete with five full games, including *Deus Ex* and *Thief II*—as a colorful and decorative Frisbee. Or you could suck it up and buy a DVD drive to enjoy the seven-plus CDs worth of stuff we managed to fit on there, ya whiny ingrates. If nothing else, the sleeve doubles as a makeshift toothpick.

SPECIAL AWARDS: GAMES WORTH A MENTION

ROLE-PLAYING GAME OF THE YEAR

Knights of the Old Republic

Apart from one gigantic exception, it wasn't a great year for role-playing games. For the word on *Knights*, see Game of the Year.

BEST USE OF A LICENSE

Tron 2.0

There were many good uses of a license this year, but *Tron* stood out because the series was all but dead. *Tron 2.0* laid down the resurrection code to upgrade this aged story into a new digital dynasty, without forgetting the light cycles, frisbees of doom, and amber waves of pain.

WORST USE OF A LICENSE

Enter the Matrix

What is the Matrix? We thought we knew, but after this last year, we wish we didn't. *Enter the Matrix* substantiates and destructively compounds everything that was bad about the last two movies. The only real redeeming quality was cutting-room floor movie footage. Jack in? No—jacked up!

BEST STORY

Knights of the Old Republic

Someone needs to get over to George Lucas' house right now and rip the *Episode III* script out of his hands. Not only is *KOTOR* a great game, but it also has some of the best writing and most devious plot twists in memory. The dialogue is so good, we can't even compare it to other games. Some movies, that's another story....

BEST MUSIC

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

It's hard to argue against the music in *Vice City*. Plenty of quality '80s music populates the soundtrack, along with a ton of "radio commercials" that are pretty darn funny. All in all, the music goes a long way toward immersing you in the world of *Vice City*. And if you don't like it, you can make your own damn soundtrack—the game even gives you the option to substitute your own tunes instead of the defaults. Sweet!

BEST TREND

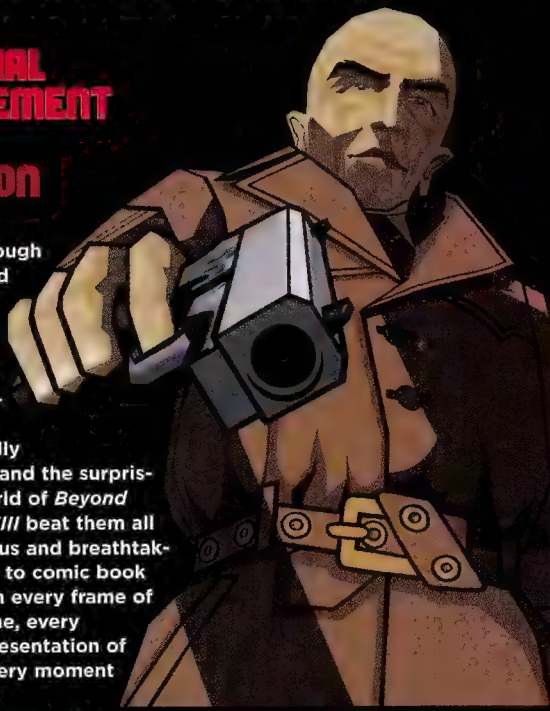
Good Licensed Games

A few years ago, games derived from licensed material were pretty much synonymous with crap. Amazingly, this trend has started to change in a big way. This year has seen some pretty solid licensed games, such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, Tron 2.0, Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King, The Simpsons: Hit & Run*, and *The Hulk*. Hopefully, this will continue—and hopefully, a few developers (*cough* Shiny *cough*) are taking notes.

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT IN ART DIRECTION

XIII

Talk about a tough choice: We had the dizzying sweep of *Prince of Persia*'s misty levels competing against *Tron 2.0*'s coolly glowing neon and the surprisingly alive world of *Beyond Good & Evil*. *XIII* beat them all with its rigorous and breathtaking adherence to comic book roots visible in every frame of every cut-scene, every graphical representation of sound, and every moment of every level.



YEAR'S BIGGEST LETDOWN

Halo

At one point, *Halo* was considered to be among the five games that would change the face of gaming as we know it. We waited desperately as it was delayed and felt pangs of sadness when it was taken away from us. When it finally was released, it wasn't nearly what it was supposed to be. As a port, it wasn't even a solid job. *Halo* PC redefined "letdown."

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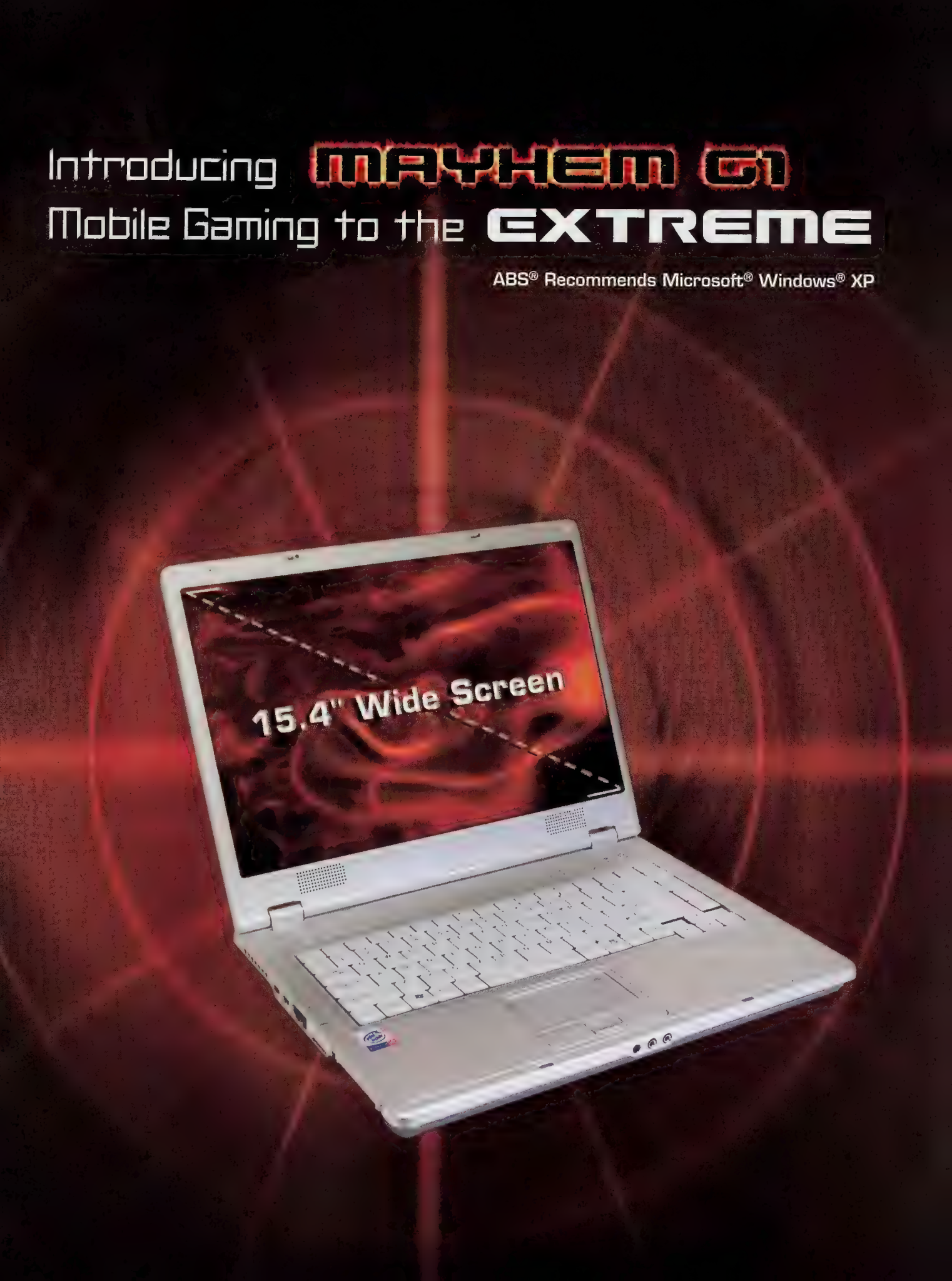

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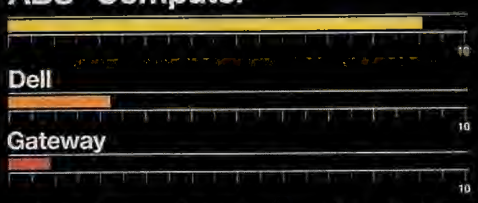

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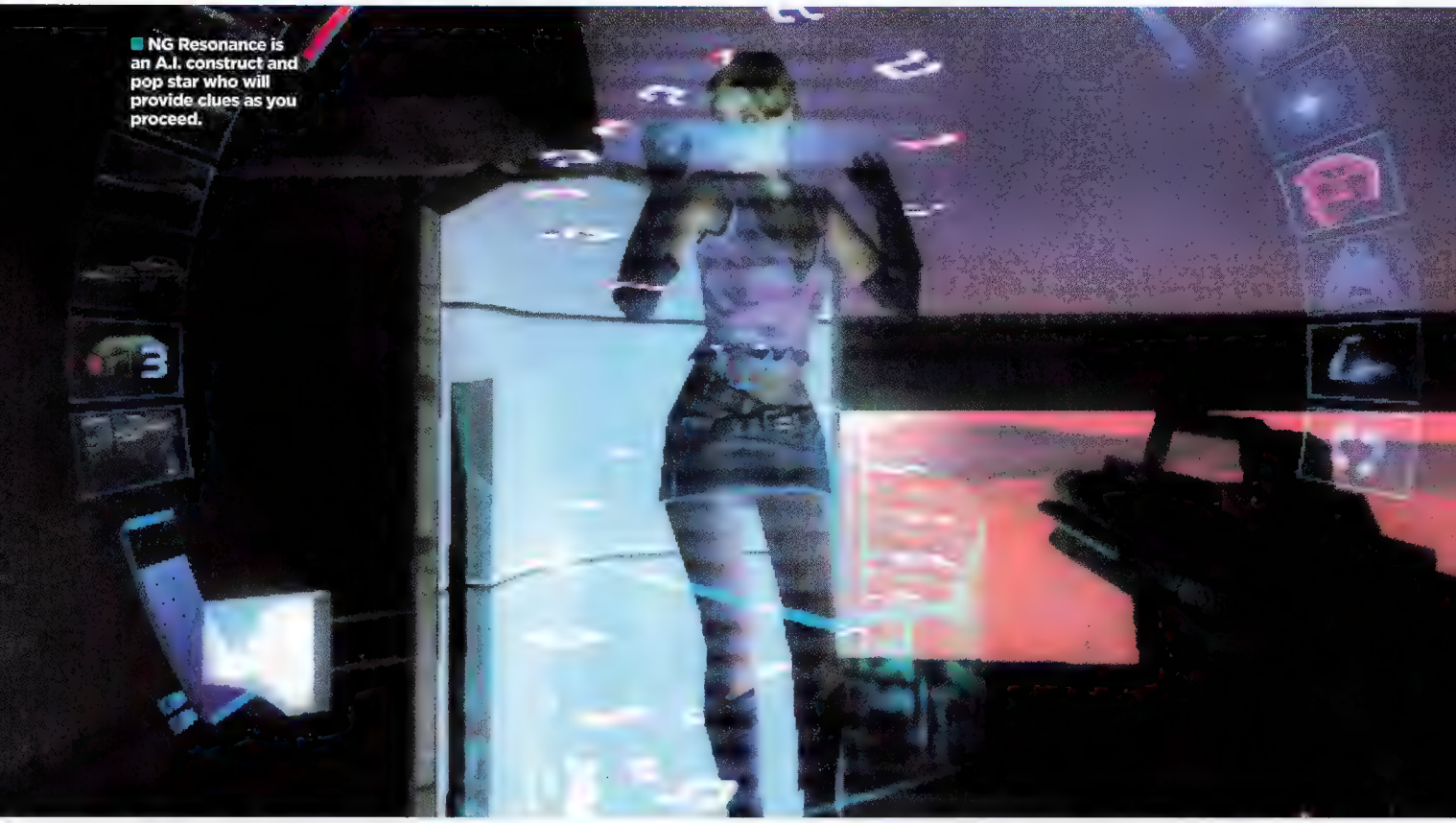
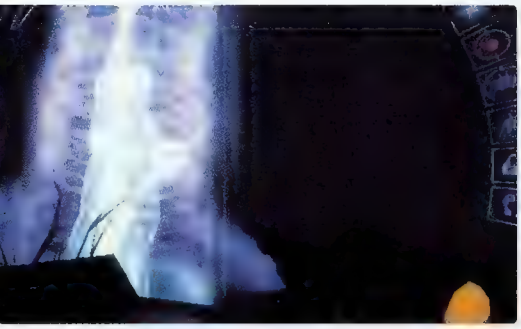


NG Resonance is an A.I. construct and pop star who will provide clues as you proceed.

PUBLISHER: **Eidos** DEVELOPER: **Ion Storm** GENRE: **Action/Roleplaying** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Intel Pentium 4 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 2GB install**
RECOMMENDED: **Intel Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Deus Ex: Invisible War

Morality, divinity, and a whole bunch of locked-door puzzles



The connection to the first game doesn't become clear until fairly late in the sequel.

There are several factions that want Alex's help, including a religious sect known as The Order.

Sometimes, you'll encounter unexpected allies.

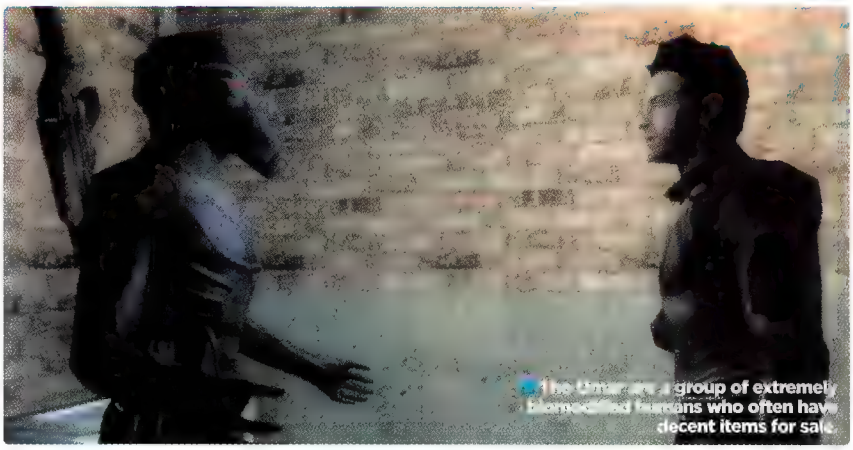
Inside

Beyond Good & Evil
It's the closest thing to *Zelda* for the PC—and it rocks.

Counter-Strike: Condition Zero
it's finally here, but should anyone care?

Lords of EverQuest
Wait a minute—didn't I play *WarCraft III,* like, a year ago?

History has been kind to the original *Deus Ex.* Its cultlike following, whose fansites often read like theology dissertations, fondly reminisces about its story and its somewhat unique blend of action and roleplaying. But its flaws (notably its often-repetitive gameplay) are mostly forgotten. Judged on its own merits, *Invisible War* is a very good game. Like the original, it has both great strengths and significant weaknesses, but the former manage to make the latter bearable in the first game. *Invisible War* has been simplified in many respects, and something has been lost in the process.


The Omar are a group of extremely biomodified humans who often have decent items for sale.

Messiah complex

Invisible War's story is its best feature. Set 20 years after the events of the original, *Invisible War* tells of the enigmatically and unisexually named Alex D., whose initials may be the most blatant religious allusion in a game since JC Denton saved the world in the first *Deus Ex.* Alex begins as a trainee at Tarsus, which at first appears to be a training ground for an elite security force, but quickly reveals itself as something more sinister. The intrigue starts immediately—the entire city of Chicago is destroyed in the opening cut-scene—and only gets more involved as the game wears on.

The story has so many twists and turns that any attempt at an even skeletal summary falls victim to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. At its most basic, it comes down to a war of philosophies and morality, with several rival factions attempting to enlist Alex's aid as biomodification (physically enhancing oneself with implants) threatens to become more widespread in the world. You must decide whom to help and when. Unfortunately, the decisions often come down to which task is the most convenient—there is very little punishment for betraying your current employer or for attempting to play the factions against each other. Later in the game it becomes clear that there are significant reasons for this lack of consequence, but it's disappointing that you're so easily forgiven for failing to perform assignments you've accepted.

The manner in which you execute your tasks is generally up to you. While the original's skill system has been completely removed (it definitely had quirks, so this is not entirely a bad thing), Alex has the ability to biomodify his/her body, which adds new abilities to his/her arsenal. There are several biomodification slots, and each has three choices for enhancement. Not all of the skills are useful (for instance, taking anything other than the stealth mod for the foot slot would be a mistake), but they do allow you to customize your experience to some degree.

Strength or stealth?

The problem with this freedom is that every section of the game feels somewhat similar as a result. You can either charge into a hostile area with guns blazing or find some stealthy way—almost always a handy ventilation shaft—to sneak around. After a while, every conflict and puzzle in *Invisible War* begins to feel like a carbon copy of the previous one. This problem dogged the original as well, and it's frustrating that Ion Storm couldn't find a more interesting means of providing both stealth and action. Also problematic is that the original release of the game is very unstable and has a terrible framerate at higher resolutions, though this problem was addressed with the first patch.

Saving the game from its own flaws are the morally ambiguous choices you are constantly forced to make. There is rarely an evil or good choice, and right up until the end (assuming you can follow the story's occasionally convoluted twists and turns), you'll be unsure of whom to trust. The game has four possible endings, and strangely, none of them is clearly correct. What appears to be the good ending is actually somewhat terrifying, while the most unsatisfying ending in terms of conventional morality is actually the most rewarding.

That one can talk about the game in terms of conventional morality should be enough to recommend it to its target audience. *Invisible War*'s mechanics are often repetitive and frustrating, but the choices you make are not, which helps keep things interesting even when you're unlocking yet another door with another multitool for the umpteenth time. **Ron Dulin**

That one can talk about the game in terms of conventional morality should be enough to recommend it to its target audience.

Verdict ★★★☆☆
The sequel to *Deus Ex* is both dumbed down and smarted up.

Dude, Where's My Stuff?

Invisible War's simplification extends beyond the removal of the original's skill system. While there are a variety of guns, there is only one type of ammunition. Unrealistic, yes, but also a blessing in disguise, since ammo is so scarce. Necessary items are scarce in general, and finding enough ammo or multitools (an electronic lock pick) requires combing every area of every room. The game has a basic economic system, but oddly, you can't buy the most basic items. Dumpster diving is encouraged, as is moving furniture and boxes—the inhabitants of *Deus Ex* discard full clips and lock picks with reckless abandon.

PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** DEVELOPER: **Planet Moon Studios** GENRE: **Action** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 4.5GB install, 32MB 3D card** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: **None**

Armed and Dangerous

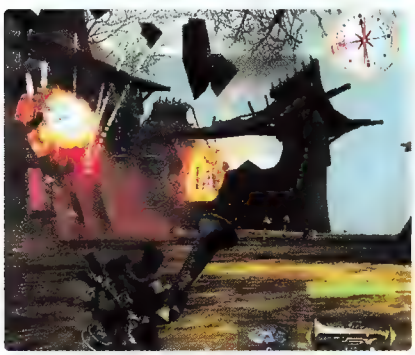
Yuck yuck bang boom yadda yadda

Planet Moon's *Armed and Dangerous* is *Kelly's Heroes* meets *Shrek* by way of Monty Python and Guy Ritchie. It involves shooting a lot of hapless orcs and Europeans of indeterminate accents. Along the way, there are quips about *Star Wars*, the French, vegetarian robots, and sheep buggery. They even slip in a reference to *Sling Blade* and "your momma" jokes. Just go with it, *Armed & Dangerous* seems to say, and don't worry about whether it makes sense.

Punchy punchlines

In an industry where "humor" means lame sarcasm, mugging, or pratfalls, *Armed and Dangerous* stands out for actually being funny on its own terms. This is one of those all-too-rare games in which the cut-scenes are worth watching (even if they are scaled down to a horribly lossy low res). Planet Moon has a great feel for comedic timing and how to frame a shot. You'll also want to jack up the voice audio so you don't miss some of the in-game one-liners and exchanges. "You'll never guess what happened to me!" a rescued peasant tells his wife. "You turned gay?" she asks. No rim shot or laugh track needed.

As for the gameplay, if you're worried that this is just a quick console port, don't be. The controls are great and the technology is sharp, smooth, and robust. You get to wreak havoc through stylish, expansive levels that alternate between quaint medieval villages and gritty industrial settings, complete with detailed trees, water effects, elaborate skies, and flying body physics.



A little impromptu urban renewal.

On a half dozen wings and a prayer.

Punchless punching

Although the generic title doesn't do justice to the game's shrewd sense of humor, it is fitting for the fairly generic action, which is only peripherally connected to the cut-scenes. Your band of mismatched rogues will put together an elaborate scheme, only to recede into the background during 10 minutes of running and gunning. With the exception of a really frustrating "protect the village" mission, mixing up the objectives doesn't do anything to change the fact that you're really just playing a forgiving "shoot everything!" game. Although the first few levels introduce some clever and promising scripted tricks (triggering an avalanche to crush buildings, exploding barrels that rocket straight up into the sky, grunts shimmying up drainpipes to snipe from roofs), these go by the wayside pretty quickly and you're left with a straight-laced shooter.

Planet Moon's *Giants* had the same problem, running out of steam long before it was over. But *Giants* had three distinct races to play and ambitious multiplayer support. There's nothing like that here, and *Armed and Dangerous* peters out way too soon. It tips its hand early on with fun stuff like the Land Shark Gun and sticky grenades as in *Halo*. It's a bit too selfish with the crazy weapons like the Guy Fawkes Traitor Bomb, the World's Smallest Black Hole, and a corkscrew that literally turns the world upside down. Once you've seen all this, the last two thirds has a disappointing "is that all there is?" feeling. You're eventually left without much to do besides lean on the Fire button and wait for the next cut-scene. **Tom Chick**

Verdict ★★★☆☆
A straight-laced shooter with great cut-scenes.

***Armed & Dangerous* stands out for actually being funny on its own terms.**

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **EA Black Box** GENRE: **Action/Driving** ESRB: **Everyone** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 2GB install**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.8 GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card**

Need for Speed Underground

EDITOR'S CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

Crank up the bass, it's time to race

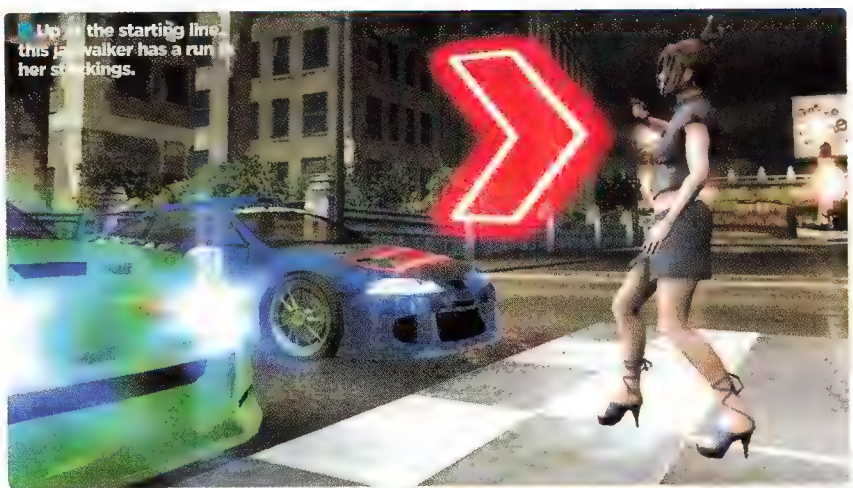
Not until you punch the nitrous do you get a true appreciation for the term "speed." The neon-laced streets blur past and the camera uncontrollably shakes. The end result: You're glued to your seat fighting Gs in *Need for Speed Underground*, the best damn racing game to roll down the avenue.

Make no mistake about it—this is not a full-on driving sim, nor is it anything like previous games in the *NFS* series. Rather than getting behind the wheel of exotic supercars you could never afford in real life, you're steering import racers—you know, sexy cars like the Ford Focus, Dodge Neon, Honda Civic, and so on. It may not sound like much, but you'll soon get sucked into the varied race types (including skidding out on closed courses, sprinting down crowded city streets, and drag racing) to earn street cred. This allows you to unlock more visual and performance-enhancing tweaks for your ride.

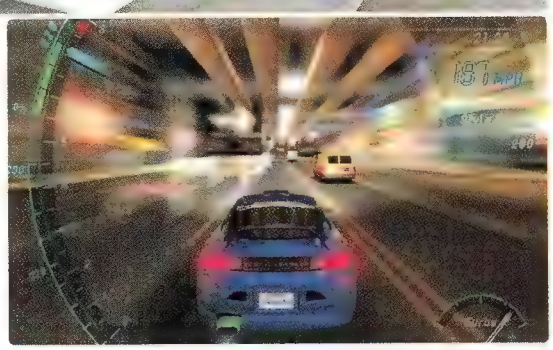
The mod squad

Modding your vehicle is what import racing (and *NFSU*) is all about. The base models of all the cars handle differently, but once you start adding parts, your handling, speed, and acceleration improve. It's a nice touch to push you through the single-player game, though it's a little flawed: Instead of different brand-name components improving your car in different ways, you essentially improve your ride by leveling up. Take the drivetrain, for example: It doesn't matter whether you get the kit sporting Neuspeed parts or HKS USA parts. It only matters whether or not you buy the pro-level parts—but they're not unlocked until later in the game.

Still, this isn't some beauty contest! In this pseudocity, you're racing through the gorgeous, perpetually rain-soaked streets. Shortcuts and dynamic slow-motion moments really play up the over-the-top racing. Unfortunately, there isn't a whole helluva lot of variety—the entire game



Up to the starting line, this ... walker has a run in her stockings.



No, we didn't take this screenshot "under the influence." This is nitrous at its finest.

consists of a few city miles that get sliced and diced up differently for each match. More than once, you'll instinctively know that a left turn is coming up, but the developers will have thrown up some dividers or reversed the course to eke out one more level. And for the record, having 111 levels to tear through is nice, but ugh! Give me something else to look at! Would it kill these guys to take a road trip to a different city?

Let's not forget the physics. While much more believable than those in *Midnight Club II*, *NFSU* still leans more toward the arcadey side. You'll see what I mean after your first drift into oncoming traffic. Also, if you take certain jumps at the wrong angle, you'll notice sparks fly as invisible walls grind you back on course.

A good selection of hip-hop and hard-rock tunes gets your blood pumping, but the utter lack of MP3 and custom soundtrack support means that Rob Zombie tune wears thin after your 70th race. Forget these minor sticking points, though. This game kicks asphalt! **Darren Gladstone**

Modding your vehicle is what import racing (and *NFSU*) is all about.

Verdict ★★★★½

Racing doesn't get much better...unless you're in a real car.

Bring it on(line)!

A new era is coming for gaming: PC owners are able to go head-to-head with PS2 gamers. Maybe we can finally settle the score and show 'em who's best. *NFSU* allows four players to go head-to-head (and we ran into little lag during test sessions).

PUBLISHER: **Sony Online Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Rapid Eye Entertainment** GENRE: **RTS** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 400MB install,** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card, 500MB install** MULTIPLAYER: **2-12 player LAN/Internet**

Lords of EverQuest

Dang, another set of Iksar scale gloves

The Elddar Alliance has plenty of foresty-looking structures.

It's doesn't take much to make a real-time strategy game these days. There are generally two schools of thought: the Microsoft method (á la *Age of Empires*), and the Blizzard method (á la *WarCraft*). *Lords of EverQuest* does a fairly decent job of aping the *WarCraft III* formula, while making a few hit-and-miss attempts at bringing in some new features of its own.

The RTS *modus operandi* has been boiled down to a fairly exact science at this point: A handful of diverse warring factions are saddled into a lengthy single-player campaign, complemented by a number of multiplayer options to keep players beating the crap out of each other long after the campaign mode is over. *Lords of EverQuest* follows suit, featuring three *EQ*-based factions, a like number of single-player campaign modes, and the obligatory dose of Internet play.

Tastes like chicken

The three factions each represent a part of the *EverQuest* population. Humans, barbarians, and dwarves make up the Dawn Brotherhood, while the pint-sized halflings and various elven sub-races comprise the Elddar Alliance. The Shadowrealm represents the darker races of the world of Norrath, such as dark elves, ogres, and the reptilian iksar. Each faction has five Lord characters to choose from, each with his or her own set of powers and attacks. Though the factions are somewhat unique, a lot of their respective units—as well as their Lords' powers—are a bit too similar. This robs a lot of the game's potential diversity—especially in multiplayer, where everything seems to run together just a little too much.

The RTS modus operandi has been boiled down to a fairly exact science at this point.

Individual units level up as they fight.

A.I.-controlled monsters yield random items as well as valuable experience.

Each faction has its own associated single-player campaign; the three campaigns are equal in length, totaling about 36 individual missions. The story is rooted in Norrath's past, dealing with the antipathy between the three factions, as well as their own internal strife. There's not much to be said about the game's narrative approach; if you're a die-hard *EverQuest* fan, it might pique your interest. Otherwise, this is run-of-the-mill fantasy faire. Expect to finish it off in about 20 to 25 hours of play.

Once you've finished the single-player campaign, hopefully, you'll be somewhat prepared to take down a few opponents online. The game supports LAN and Internet play for up to 12 players, with a number of large maps and plenty of victory conditions that should satisfy a variety of play styles. Victory conditions include the ubiquitous "Last Man Standing" king-of-the-hill mode, a "Platinum Rush" mode that determines the winner based on who can mine the most resources, and a "Lord of Levels" mode that awards those who are able to climb the experience ladder the quickest.

Regardless of which modes tickle your fancy or whether you're playing a single-player or multiplayer game, you're looking at a fairly uniform set of RTS gameplay mechanics. Resource-gathering is crucial early on, and platinum is the currency of choice. Platinum goes toward the purchase of buildings, units, and upgrades—the stuff of which mass destruction is made. Plenty of typical fantasy archetypes fill out the ranks, ranging from basic foot soldiers and magic-users to mounted aerial combatants and heavy siege weaponry. Paring the resource harvest down to a single necessity helps to alleviate a bit of micromanagement, though you'll definitely need to plan on looking for other mines to excavate once your initial platinum supply runs dry.

We are the Lords of EverCraft!

After you've assembled your cadre of walking death, you'll want to beat up on a few of the local A.I. monsters, who yield items and experience points. Lord characters aren't the only ones who benefit from this, either; all units gain experience, with newly produced troops starting at a level roughly equal to half your Lord's current level. You'll have the option to knight units once they gain enough experience, bestowing them with their own set of extra powers. Knights are essentially less-powerful Lords; you can have up to two in play at a time.

Battles can be quite hectic—especially the large-scale variety. The A.I. in the single-player mode isn't the brightest in the world, though you'll want to micromanage your army as much as possible for best results. Micromanagement is, of course, an absolute necessity in multiplayer games, where victory is usually determined by who takes a bigger pounding in the initial skirmishes. Should you lose your Lord or Knights in battle, you can call upon a recruiter unit to resurrect them—that is, if your opponent isn't already burning your base to the ground.

Ultimately, playing *Lords of EverQuest* pretty much feels like you're just going through the motions. The game is aesthetically stuck in the past, the single-player campaign is a typical helping of fantasy storytelling, and the multiplayer experience feels way too familiar. RTS veterans have already seen it all, and though curious *EverQuest* fans could do worse, they could certainly do a lot better.

Lords of EverQuest is another RTS. What more is there to say? **Ryan Scott**

Verdict ★★★☆☆

A fairly decent attempt to capitalize on a tried and true (*WarCraft III*) formula.

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **BioWare** GENRE: **RPG** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800, 128MB RAM (256MB RAM for Windows XP), 1.5GB install, 32MB 3D card** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM (512MB RAM for Windows XP), 64MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Neverwinter Nights: Hordes of the Underdark

Epic characters, epic story, epic bugs

I can't even begin to explain what a phenomenal game this was to play! I can't even begin to explain what a buggy game this was to play! Argh! Couldn't BioWare have waited just a little to release a stable game? You can still play as the character you used in *Shadows of Undrentide,* but now, you'll meet many familiar faces from the original *NWN* game—sometimes at the most unexpected times or places. Talking about the story line will spoil the riches this expansion pack has to offer, but suffice to say, the road to the end of *Hordes of the Underdark* will take you farther than you can imagine.

Want to feel like a champ? Summon Red Dragon to fight by your side.

Bigger than life

Having two henchmen or the new beasts and tile sets are all worthwhile additions, but the character changes are the real focus. The character cap is raised to 40, so you'll find your character becoming "epic" at level 21, opening up some impressive feats. The first time my epic cleric summoned a Red Dragon to fight by my side, I got chills. While you probably won't max out your character in this expansion pack, the new feats and prestige classes will give you incentive to play online (or play the single player games again). I looked enviously at the new dragon disciple prestige class for sorcerers and bards. Admit it: You know you've dreamed of becoming a half-dragon.

Admit it; you know you've dreamed of becoming a half-dragon.

Morality and allegiances have always been a significant part of *NWN,* but *Hordes* ramps it up. The underlying reason you travel and meet new races is ultimately to forge alliances (and create enemies) for a vast upcoming battle. Even at the end, one simple action or double cross can topple all the planning and diplomacy you've worked for the entire game. One quest of unearthing ancient feuds between sentient golems could have been a simple side mission, but instead turns into a moral decision that leads an entire race to fight in your name. Powerful stuff.

And just when you think the end of the game is coming up, it only gets better. You go on a quasi-religious journey unlike anything in the previous games. Encountering some of the more reluctant majestic beings—like the quest to find the Sleeping Man's true love—is a surreal experience. Finding your own true love can be bittersweet, likewise, if you happen to go down that road.

But all of this great content is severely undermined by bugs. Big, game-killing bugs. Additionally, I suffered incredibly chunky framerates at times and an occasional crash. BioWare has responded with updates, but unfortunately, these seem to be buggy as well. *Hordes of the Underdark* has that woefully underbaked, released-just-in-time-for-the-holidays taint to it, and that's just a colossal shame, because underneath that nastiness is a great, great expansion. I eventually got over it. You may not. **Jason Babler**

The Drow were my favorite subspecies of elves until I met the lovely winged elven race called Avariel. Tastes like chicken, yum!

Squashing the bugs

AFTER LENGTHY FORUM-CRAWLING, I found a decent workaround for the worst of the bugs. Uninstall the game if you already have it on your PC, move your saved characters and game folder to a safe location, then delete the leftover *Neverwinter* folder. Reinstall and move your saved games/characters back. Still, don't expect it to be bug-free, even with the updates.

Verdict ★★★½☆

A five-star expansion sadly undone by bugs.

PUBLISHER: **Strategy First** DEVELOPER: **Paradox Entertainment** GENRE: **RTS** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 450, 128MB RAM, 600MB install**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 800, 256MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet (2-32 players)**

Victoria: An Empire Under the Sun

The sun almost sets on the British Empire

***Victoria: An Empire Under the Sun* is buggier than a swamp and less intuitive than a tax form, but there's something innately fascinating about it. A fantastically detailed strategy game, it tries to simulate war,** industrial revolution, politics, and colonialism during the Victorian era—and succeeds, to a point.

Veterans of the *Europa Universalis* games should get into *Victoria* without a problem. There are some new intricacies, such as population castes, more manufactured goods, and a more involved political system, but none are too difficult to figure out. *Victoria* is more challenging and more involved than previous EU games and quite enjoyable when it works.

Newbies, on the other hand, will find *Victoria* nearly incomprehensible. The thin manual isn't bad for explaining basic moves, but it doesn't explain the game's intricacies, especially the baroque economic system. The lack of a tutorial (or at least a thicker manual) is inexcusable for a game of such complexity.

Unpatched, the game also suffers from horrible stability and balance issues. It's too easy to create huge armies and build up ridiculously large treasuries, and the game frequently crashes to the desktop. *Victoria* could be a classic after a few patches, but in the initial release, you're paying Paradox to beta test their game. **Di Luo**

Despite the title, scenarios include the American Civil War, customized with generals like Bobby Lee and Thomas Jackson. Go figure.

Unpatched, the game also suffers from horrible stability and balance issues.

Verdict ★★★☆☆
Good game, bad bugs. Patch, patch, patch.

PUBLISHER: **U.S. Army** DEVELOPER: **U.S. Army** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, 1.62GB install, 56k modem**
RECOMMENDED: **512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card, broadband Internet service** MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: **Internet, LAN (2-20 players)**

America's Army: Special Forces v2.0

EDITOR'S CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING

The Quiet Professionals get to work

OK, I'll admit it. I'm biased. My longtime employer, the U.S. Army, just added steroids to the original *America's Army* game by adding more bells and whistles than a SOPMOD-equipped M4. As a result, *America's Army* is now one of the best, if not the best tactical sim to grace a computer.

America's Army: Special Forces v2.0 is notable for a number of reasons. It adds the critical role of a combat medic class, so healing injured teammates during combat can mean the difference between winning and losing a match. It includes four newly made or revised maps, along with new weapons like the Army-issue M9 9mm, SPR Rifle, MP5SD6, AKS-74U, the 4k hot Thermite Grenade, and more. Graphics, sound, character models, and ballistics also get make-overs, including beefed up server protocols and the anti-cheating program *punkbuster*. But the focus of *2.0* details the history and training of the U.S. Army's elite Special Forces soldiers. It's a great glimpse into what it means to be one of these elite combatants.

Army Special Forces are the United States military experts on Unconventional Warfare (or Low Intensity Conflict), specializing in conducting a multitude of high-risk missions—all of which are covered in this update. With the *Special Forces* update, *America's Army* gives players an inside perspective on Special Forces roles and military specialties through virtual training exercises.

Once a player successfully completes a challenging written exam on enemy vehicle, aircraft, and weapons identification, along with completing the Escape and Evade course, they're able to play as Special Forces soldiers online via the revamped Pipeline, along with Hospital, Recon, and CSAR maps. Escorting a VIP, identifying enemy vehicles, and playing as indigenous forces are a couple of the new features added to maps. However, there's a catch: Not everyone can play as an SF soldier. You need a minimum Honor (duty and integrity) level of 15 (equivalent to 10,000 experience points) in order to utilize an SF slot for the Internet games.

I might be predisposed, but I know a good thing when I see it. Everything in *2.0* makes *America's Army* more intense, more gripping, and more deserving of its status as the top tactical sim. **Raphael Liberatore**

Becoming a combat medic is a great way of loading up on Honor Points. Get enough and you'll qualify for *2.0*'s other new class, Special Forces.

It's a great glimpse into what it means to be one of these elite combatants.

Verdict ★★★★½
***Special Forces* is the tactical sim genre at its finest.**

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** GENRE: **Stealth Action-adventure** ESRB RATING: **Teen** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700, 64MB RAM, 32MB 3D card** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 128MB RAM, 64MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

Beyond Good & Evil

The best game you never heard of

Beyond the blockbuster games and the rotten tomatoes, the runaway hits and the forgettable travesties, there lies a nebula of quality gems that are undeservedly relegated to the bargain bin. These games— these sleepers—are often passed over in favor of the big-name games, the heavy hitters that sell 400,000 copies on name alone, quality be damned. *Beyond Good & Evil* is one of the overlooked games.

The brainchild of *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel, *BG&E* tells the tale of a young lady named Jade who resides on the planet Hillys. An amateur journalist and photographer, Jade is the self-appointed caretaker of the local orphans whose parents have been murdered by the extraterrestrial DomZ Armada. Prompted by a DomZ attack on her home, Jade's investigative efforts lead her to an intricate conspiracy theory that suggests her planet's militaristic government as the instigator of the alien invasions. With her stouthearted Uncle Pey'j in tow, Jade embarks on a quest to learn the truth.

Zooming around in your hovercraft and killing unruly crustaceans is all in a day's work.

Shutterbug

Much of *BG&E*'s gameplay consists of running around, solving puzzles, and obtaining photographic evidence of the Hillyan government's true agenda. The puzzles start off pretty easy, and although they end up getting fairly tricky (with a few mildly irritating hunt-and-fetch quests), they rarely feel frustrating or unfair. You traipse through most of the game alongside a partner character, which becomes a key element to solving some of the more elaborate problems you encounter.

Combat is thoroughly simple, and in many cases, not even mandatory. When you do get into a scuffle, you can usually button-mash your way through it; your partner helps out with a stun attack, making battles even easier. Aside from the handful of strategically oriented boss fights you encounter, most threats can be avoided through careful timing and stealth, which is especially crucial in later areas, where being spotted often means instant death.

The world of Hillys is a vibrant archipelago, intertwining a number of Asian, Spanish, and Caribbean motifs with a distinct sci-fi theme. You do most of your traveling in a zippy little hovercraft guided by an area map and objective list. Your hovercraft can be outfitted with various equipment upgrades, which gradually open up more areas for exploration. The game world does seem somewhat small, although the areas you visit are all very fitting and well designed.

Partners in crime(fighting)

Designwise, another thing that definitely stands out is the collection of characters. The anthropomorphic supporting cast gives the setting an exotic feel, and Jade comes across as a particularly endearing, emotive heroine. The excellent voice acting adds an extra layer of polish to the characters, and it all comes together to create a fun, enjoyable experience. The only caveat is the game's length—you'll finish it in about 13 hours, tops. Sweet, but short.

Still, *BG&E* is one fine piece of work. High production values, a compelling narrative, charming characters, and sharp aesthetics make for a sophisticated little adventure that's well beyond most of its ilk. **Ryan Scott**

Stealth is especially crucial in later areas, where being spotted often means instant death.

Verdict ★★★★½

Gorgeous, stylish, and wholly original, this action-adventure is a gem

PUBLISHER: **Detalion** DEVELOPER: **The Adventure Company** GENRE: **Adventure/Puzzle Game** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800MHz, 128MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, 3GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1.6GHz, 256MB RAM, 128MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: **None**

Mysterious Journey II

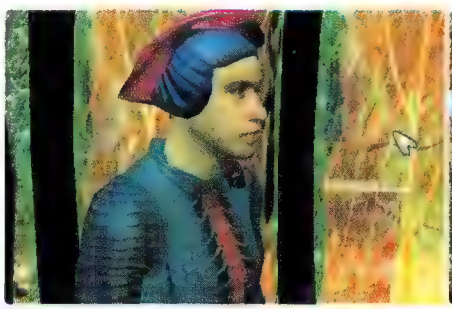
Journey to the center of the dearth

In Mysterious Journey II, you explore the shattered remains of a once-great civilization, a concept that might also describe the aging puzzle-adventure genre. Mysterious Journey II replaces the static 2D images of old with a fully rendered 3D world, but the visuals are mostly window dressing—interaction is limited to basic movement, and the only true gameplay is a series of puzzles that often have a tenuous relationship to the game world.

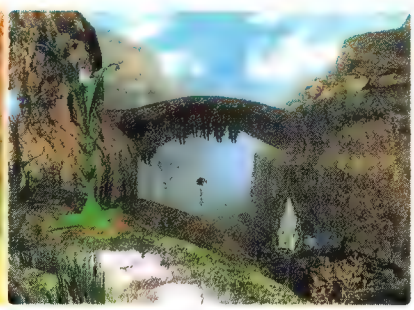
The game begins with you on a space station in a decaying orbit, with no memory of your past. After solving a few puzzles that somehow help you to escape from the station, you arrive on a planet torn by cultural war between the science-loving Transai and the nature-worshipping Ansala. Your role in the planet's history is slowly revealed through cut-scenes and conversations with taciturn alien "companions," yet your motivation for solving the endless stream of Mensa puzzles remains unclear to the end.

Solving the puzzles generally requires manipulating levers or buttons that change the environment in some way, often clearing an obstacle or aligning parts of a pathway. Many puzzles can be analyzed as math problems and solved on paper first, although some succumb to brute force. One of the more imaginative brainteasers requires use of nearby visual and audio Rosetta stones to discover a code. The serial nature of the puzzles does mean that being stumped by a single problem brings the whole game to a screeching halt, but few of the puzzles are difficult enough to be laborious.

The game is surprisingly short given that it consumes almost 3GB of disk space. The environments, while beautiful, are disappointingly void of interaction, and the story, while interesting, is wholly irrelevant to the gameplay. *Mysterious Journey II* is a good puzzle game that also reminds us why puzzle games aren't that popular. **Jonah Jackson**



I don't know what I am doing or why I am wearing this hat. Mysterious!



I promise there is a clue in this picture.

Verdict ★★½☆☆

For puzzle players who like pretty pictures, too.

Revisionist History

New Info, Old Games

Unreal II: The Awakening had a huge, gaping wound right out of the box: Multiplayer support, vital to a shooter's longevity, was long ago ripped out like Adam's rib and turned into *Unreal Tournament 2003*. Legend has rectified that mistake with *Unreal II XMP*, a 300MB free downloadable patch that does quite a bit more than you might expect.

XMP is not a full-bore MP addition to *Unreal II*, but a single team-based strategy mode akin to *Tribes*. Essentially a riff on the onslaught mode being developed for *Unreal Tournament 2004*, *XMP* offers vehicles, multiple classes, various control points, and an expanded form of CTF.

Each side begins with two artifacts (i.e., flags) in their base; the team that controls the most artifacts wins. The landscapes are far more expansive than usual *Unreal* maps, creating a more deliberate pace and shifting the emphasis to vehicles. Some of these are simply souped-up dune buggies, while others are multiseat tanks with driver and gunner positions. Added to the mix are turrets (fixed and user-placed), mines, and field generators; together, they create a more team-focused tactical experience. None of these extras will work, however, until teams begin to capture and control generators. It's possible to gradually shut down a team's turrets, vehicles, and even mines by denying them power, a feature that adds a fresh element to CTF tactics.

Classes are standard issue, but quite functional. There's the ranger (a light, fast guy with a sniper rifle), the gunner (a heavy, slow guy with a rocket launcher), and the tech (a baby bear who's just right). Everyone has the ability to hack and revive fallen comrades, but techs hack and rangers heal faster.

XMP solders shut the gash in *Unreal II* and offers a shakedown cruise for some of the features being developed for *Tournament 2004*. There are some flaws. Vehicle control is a bit touchy and some maps can stalemate, but in the end, *XMP* is worth at least twice what you will pay for it. **Thomas L. McDonald**

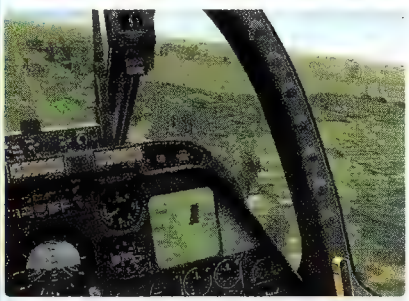
PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Eagle Dynamics** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800, 256MB RAM, 1.1GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER: **LAN, Internet (2-32 players)**

Lock-On: Modern Air Combat

False campaign promises in hardcore heaven

The F-15C Eagle handles air combat only—"not a pound for air to ground."

You can shoot carrier landings in the Su-32.



The sense of speed during low-level flight in an A-10 is right on the money.

This is the first bone tossed at hardcore jet-sim fans since...well, since *Flanker 2.5*, the previous game in the series, was released nearly two years ago. *Lock-On: Modern Air Combat* takes the realism and detail associated with the *Flanker* games, kicks the graphics up a dozen notches, and finally adds some American hardware for you to fly. The long-awaited dynamic campaign remains AWOL here, so rabid *Falcon 4.0* fans can stop reading now and go back to posting on message boards about how great that sim is. The rest of us, though, can load up *LOMAC* and marvel at the detailed re-creations of eight modern jet fighters and attack jets.

Probably this sim's most anticipated feature is the chance to fly the USAF A-10 Warthog attack jet, and *LOMAC* doesn't disappoint here. Not only are the plane, its cockpit, and the various weapons it can haul with its 16,000-pound bomb load modeled in meticulous detail, but the graphics engine has also seen a dramatic upgrade to keep the experience real when flying down in the dirt. Detailed terrain, buildings, water, and effects such as ground haze and lighting look fantastic and lend an unprecedented feeling of speed to low-level flight. Also modeled in exacting detail are the Russian Su-25 Sturmovik, the USAF F-15C Eagle, and the Russian Su-27 and Su-33 Flankers, as well as three versions of the MiG-29 Fulcrum. And *LOMAC* models dozens more computer-flown aircraft (backed by viciously aggressive A.I.), along with virtually every ground vehicle used by today's military.

Flight school

Although *LOMAC* offers optional simplified flight models and radar options, this isn't a game for gamers who want to jump in and start shooting; even with the realism turned down, you need to master the various planes' radar and weapons systems. Unfortunately, the documentation

The planes may be realistic, but the explosions are pure Hollywood.

Damage location affects your performance—not that it matters in this case.

He has about a quarter second to live.

An Su-25 lays waste to a ground target.

Detailed terrain, buildings, water, and effects lend an unprecedented feeling of speed to low-level flight.

isn't much help. There's a 50-page getting-started booklet and a more thorough PDF manual on the CD, but even that glosses over many important systems. Your best bet is to spend time watching and flying the in-game tutorials, which walk you step-by-step through basic flight, combat maneuvering, and weapons systems.

The dynamic-campaign system was victim to a number of development snafus, so *LOMAC* instead includes four scripted campaigns that feature persistent object damage between missions, a number of single missions, and a quick mission generator. The powerful mission editor is extremely easy to use, so despite the canned campaign, the sheer number of add-on missions available on the Net should make for inexhaustible gameplay. Multiplayer (co-op or head-to-head) is a blast, though lag becomes a problem with more than six players.

LOMAC is not without problems, including graphics glitches, improper icons on the theater-status map, a replay tool I couldn't get to work, and the lofty requirements needed to crank the graphics settings up.

Glitches aside, this is an exciting, visceral simulation likely to offer hundreds of hours of entertainment—as long as you're the type who thinks learning which radar mode works best for a turning fight is fascinating. **Denny Atkin**

Verdict ★★★½☆

A tasty treat for starving jet-sim fans—even without the dynamic campaign.

Manual Love

The days of massive flight-sim manuals like the amazing *Falcon 4.0* binder are long past—the best today's sim pilots can hope for is decent PDF documentation on CD. And even those PDF manuals can be light due to time and budget issues that developers face. To mollify documentation fans, Ubisoft worked with Digital Aspirin to create the *LOMAC Enhanced Manual*, available from www.lomac-manual.com as a $15 PDF or in full-color glory in a leather binder for $39.99. Note that the first 130 pages of the 306-page manual are nearly identical to the PDF manual included on the *LOMAC* disc. The *Enhanced Manual* adds an extensive training section that walks you step-by-step through the sim's systems, as well as recognition charts for the game's air and ground vehicles. It's good stuff, although we'd like to have seen more theory and background to go along with the procedural tutorials. Although the printed manual is expensive—it costs as much as the sim—it comes in at less than half of the quote we got from a local Kinko's for printing and binding the PDF.

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING **Everyone** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 1.5GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1Ghz, 256MB RAM, 128MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER: **LAN, Internet (2-8 players)**

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

NBA Live 2004

EA Sports' latest basketball game is the best version yet

One problem when a company consistently dominates a genre is that it becomes complacent and ceases to innovate. Fortunately, EA Sports refuses to rest on its laurels. It's safe to say that *NBA Live 2004* is more than just the best *NBA Live* yet—it may be the best five-on-five basketball game available on any platform. We could run down an extensive laundry list of the cool features the game supports, like an enhanced dynasty mode and online play, but you can just go online and see that for yourself. Rather, we're gonna talk about why this game compels us to keep coming back for more in a way no five-on-five basketball game has ever done.

Gameplay in five-on-five basketball games has always felt jumbled up in the paint. If seeing the court well wasn't a problem, getting players to cut and passing to men players was. These problems have been mostly solved with *NBA Live 2004*. Visually, the players are more spread out than they are in other games, and gameplay is no longer about figuring out the few fancy moves and taking your star player to the hole. Playing a winning season as the Lakers requires that you bring the ball up the court, call some offensive plays, and find the open player. Often, that player is Shaq low in the post. But hey, that's exactly how the Lakers managed to win three straight championships.

From the free-throw line you can really see how beautiful the game is.

Darius Miles takes it to the rack.

Where last year's version of *Live* felt kind of arcadey, *NBA Live 2004's* defensive improvements makes the game feel more like a sim. A stouter defense means games won't devolve into wild dunk fests, and the improved Freestyle Controller lets you do the one-on-one moves necessary to get an open look at cutters or the basket when you get a pass in the paint.

But what makes *NBA Live 2004* a great game is that it's simply fun to play. Eking out wins against tougher teams won't be easy, which means you need to use the practice modes to hone your skills before games. Add Internet play and excellent commentary from Marv Albert and Mike Fratello, and *NBA Live* will leave round ball fans happy for some time. **William O'Neal**

Verdict ★★★★½

One of the best five-on-five games for any platform.

PUBLISHER: **Konami** DEVELOPER: **Konami** GENRE: **Action-Adventure** ESRB RATING: **Mature, blood and gore, violence** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 4.7GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, 5.2GB install Multiplayer: None**

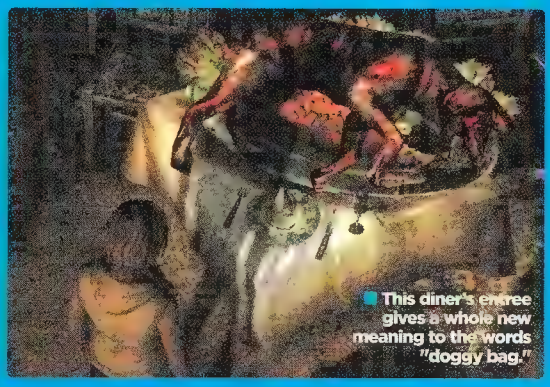
Silent Hill 3

Fighting an uphill battle

If you're grateful about colliding with weirdos in endless hallways only during your holiday shopping, then don't play Silent Hill 3. The oafish monsters in the town of Silent Hill not only invade its mall, but also slowly attempt to bump you to death in office corridors, park alleys, subways, and hospital halls. This is survival-horror?

You play as Heather, a lovely teenager visiting the town as it becomes possessed. You can't help noticing her lifelike beauty, mainly because the camera constantly swerves to face her instead of what's in front of her. There's a look command, but it's as limited as the weapons left about. Swinging the maul is painfully slow, and gun ammo is so scarce that you'll save it for boss battles. The copper pipe and the sword rock, but you'll frequently dodge enemies instead, since they don't follow you far or drop goodies. Health kits, ammo, and simple puzzle items are usually found inside a few enterable storerooms buried among countless inoperable doors.

Despite several scary scenes, the plot line doesn't appear till the end of the game. It does mesh with the original *Silent Hill*, but it's plagued by the series' inane conversations. All told, *Silent Hill 3* can't be saved from the gaming graveyard. **Denice Cook**



This diner's entree gives a whole new meaning to the words "doggy bag."

You'll frequently dodge the oafish enemies instead of fighting.

Verdict ★½☆☆☆

In SH3, the only things that go bump in the night are klutzy monsters.

MANUFACTURER: **Vivendi Universal** DEVELOPER: **Valve Software and Turtle Rock Studios** URL: **www.vugames.com** PRICE: **$39.99** ESRB RATING. **M**
REQUIRED: **Pentium III 500MHz, 96MB RAM, 16MB 3D card, 500MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card**

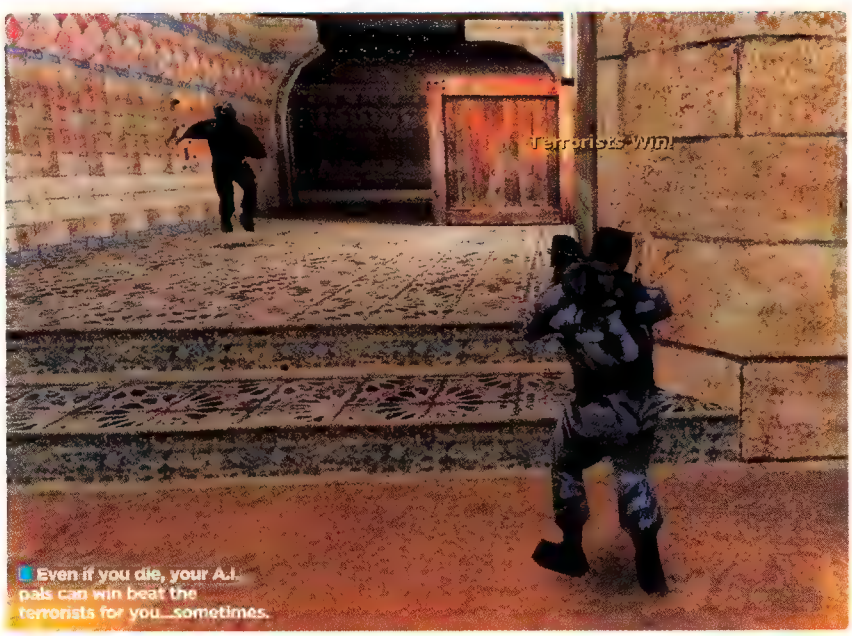
Counter-Strike: Condition Zero

More of the same...the same fun, that is

How do you review a game that you've loved for years? The fact that we've been playing *Counter-Strike* for so long says something about the game: It's obviously a lot of fun. That said, the idea of paying $40 for a game we've been playing for years for free seems kind of silly. Which, of course, begs the question: What exactly is *Counter-Strike: Condition Zero*?

What *Condition Zero* started out as and what it ended up being are two totally different things. In an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of a mod based on *Half-Life*, Valve got control of *CS* and gave the *Condition Zero* project to Ritual Entertainment. Valve didn't like what Ritual put together, so it gave the project to Turtle Rock Studios. Years of previews and exclusive "behind-the-scenes" showings later, the final game is less the innovative title we were promised, but more the *CS* we've been playing for years with with some exceptional bot play, new maps, and new goals interjected into the standard "rescue the hostages" and "defuse the bomb" scenarios.

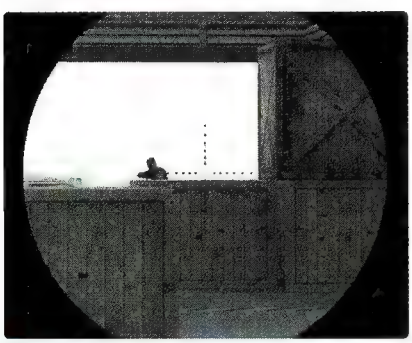
All of which begs the question: Do we like the game that Valve shipped?



Even if you die, your A.I. pals can win beat the terrorists for you...sometimes.

Smart bombers

The short answer is yes. Since we've enjoyed *CS* for years, it should come as no surprise that *Condition Zero*—which is essentially *CS* with some excellent updates—is enjoyable. In *Condition Zero*, you're the commander of the counter-terrorism team as you battle terrorists in 20 maps (some old ones like Dust, Aztec, and Prodigy, and new maps like Torn and Château). The A.I. on both sides of the conflict is awesome; as the leader of the counter-terrorists, your A.I. pals will follow you and, in some cases, "take the point:" You can give them orders via the chat feature and they'll do things like camp on a bomb site or guard the bomb. You can even tell them to back you up when things get hot. And because the game attempts to make the A.I. behave like real teammates, some bots are more cooperative than others. You may give an order only to hear an A.I. teammate respond, "No way, sir!" In online play, you can even team up with your human opponents against bots, or complete an incomplete human team with bots.


Ready, aim, snipe.

As a mission-based single-player game, *Condition Zero* is more replayable than many story-based single-player games. In order to advance through the various missions, you'll have to do more than simply complete the mission goal—certain missions have sub-goals like "Kill five enemies with a sniper rifle" or "Kill three enemies with the Bullpup."

One main gripe likely to be leveled against *Condition Zero*: You can only play the game from the counter-terrorist perspective. Since, as Ken Brown likes to refer to it, the game is essentially "*CS* with training wheels," that's a bit of a bummer—it would have been nice to give new players some perspective on playing as a terrorist, too. Still, Ken is right in that *Condition Zero* is an easy way for newbies to grow accustomed to one of the most popular online games ever. As it turns out, it's also fun for old-school *CS* players like me. **William O'Neal**

Ken Brown likes to refer to *Condition Zero* as "*Counter-Strike* with training wheels."

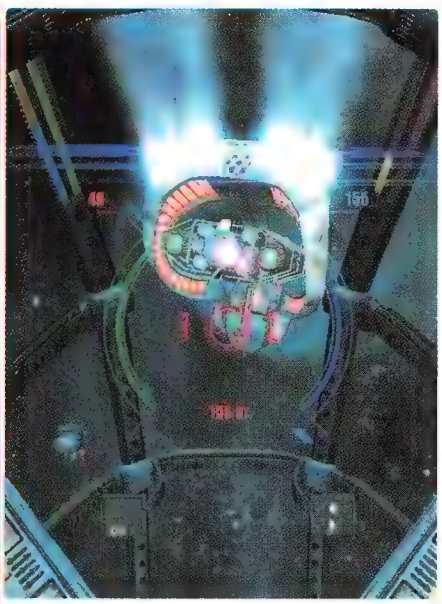
Verdict ★★★½☆
This game was great when it was free. For $40, it's just good.

PUBLISHER: **Enlight** DEVELOPER: **Egosoft** GENRE: **Space-Trading Sim** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800, 128MB RAM, 800MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM, 1GB install** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

X2—The Threat

No, no, not X2—X-Men United

Like pretty much any modern space sim, it sure looks pretty.



The different ships look cool, but if you didn't buy the proper combat equipment, it just plain sucks.

For anyone who's complained about the dearth of "deep" PC games, much less space sims in general, *X2—The Threat* was lovingly crafted for you. It's a hearty throwback to the early '90s, when games like *Privateer and Elite* were still on everyone's minds. Unfortunately, in addition to repeating the depth of those games, it also repeats the obtuse interfaces and high-learning curves of games from those eras.

A deeper Freelancer

Rather than focus on lots of flashy combat, *X2* is an economy-based space sim focused on zipping around the universe, discovering new sights and making money, with the occasional space fight. Sure, there's a story, but once you're done with it, there's lots more to do and explore. It's basically like *Freelancer*, melding combat and trade into an eminently playable mix. But while *Freelancer* arguably runs out of steam after a while, *X2* just keeps on giving in terms of content and depth. You can go from a mere scout ship that's lugging some cargo to owning an actual space station and a fleet of capital ships. *X2* has a staggeringly large universe, with diverse races, ship types, and resources. It's the kind of game in which, after disabling an alien ship, you can literally jump out of your own ship and hop inside the disabled one to fly it home. You can affect the economy of a given sector by planting a wheat factory and flooding the sector with wheat. You can rob everyone to your heart's content, and they'll happily rob you back.

Trucking at the speed of light

But for all of the game's depth, there's a painfully archaic interface and an unfriendly learning curve. Unlike in *Freelancer*, you hardly ever use the mouse in *X2*. That translates into lots of annoying keyboard banging in order to do menial things like finding jumpgates on maps or arming weapons or talking to people. If you have no docking computer, or a cheap one, you'll either have to endure slow manual docking or incorrect automatic docking. My cheap docking computer kept parking me on the wrong side of the space station—I kid you not. Want to buy a space station? Go ahead, but afterwards, you have to hire a giant, obscenely slow transport craft to ship your station to your destination. *X2* also accurately models the "fresh out of college and can't get a job" experience: Most early missions tend to require more qualifications than you have—despite the fact that these same missions are how you earn said qualifications. And it will take about 10 to 15 hours of gameplay before you can afford to do any of the fun stuff outlined earlier.

X2's biggest sin is a bug that causes random game corruption during auto-saves, and hence totally screws you over if you haven't used manual saves. Thankfully, that's the only technical problem, and it's apparently been solved by a patch—so go get it.

X2 is a deep game worthy of exploration and discovery—you'll just have to exhibit nigh-infinite patience with its glacially slow buildup and general unfriendliness. **Thierry "Scooter" Nguyen**

You can rob everyone to your heart's content, and they'll happily rob you back.

Verdict ★★★½☆

A much deeper yet less playable version of *Freelancer*.

PUBLISHER: **EA Sports** DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts** GENRE: **Racing** ESRB RATING: **E** PRICE: **$39.95** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800, 128MB RAM, 1GB install, 32MB 3D card** RECOMMENDED: **256MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: **LAN, Internet (2-16 players)**

NASCAR Thunder 2004

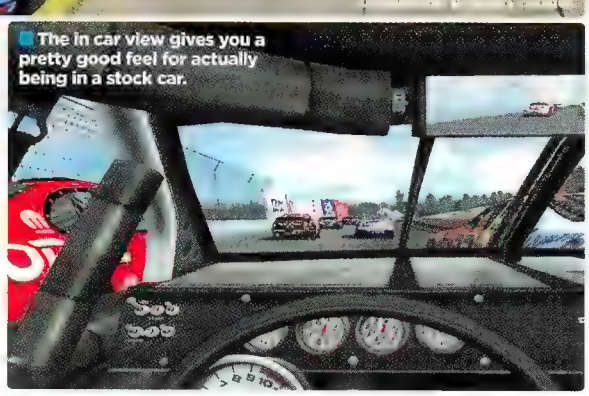
Second place in a field of one

NASCAR *Thunder 2004* from EA Sports is this year's only real stock car racing sim for the PC, what with *NASCAR Racing* creators Papyrus ending their relationship with Sierra and seemingly taking the year off. It's not a bad option, and it should suffice for many race fans, but 2004 will go down as a less than banner year for the genre.

Real cars, real fast

Simulations—driving or flying or whatever—have been a staple of PC gaming for years, so it's surprising that reviewing them is such a prickly proposition. If judged by their authenticity and attention to detail, they can really only be truly reviewed accurately by someone with real-world experience. The average gamer (as well as the average NASCAR fan) probably doesn't have this kind of credibility, and probably doesn't care about that level of accuracy. Really, a computer simulation should be judged on two experiences: Is it fun, and does it allow the user to suspend their disbelief? On both counts, EA Sports' *NASCAR Thunder* largely succeeds. But what it fails to do is live up to the legacy created by the *NASCAR Racing* series, which is known for its exacting realism but should also be credited for its accessibility and fun.

The first thing that seems a bit wrong with *NASCAR Thunder* is that, graphics-wise, it does not feel noticeably better than the console versions. The graphics engine is serviceable, but doesn't take advantage of the PC's superior technology. Other bits of polish are incongruously well done: The sound is phenomenal, and the physics—crucial to a sim like this—have been significantly upgraded. But while playing the game, one imagines it's just as enjoyable on the Xbox.



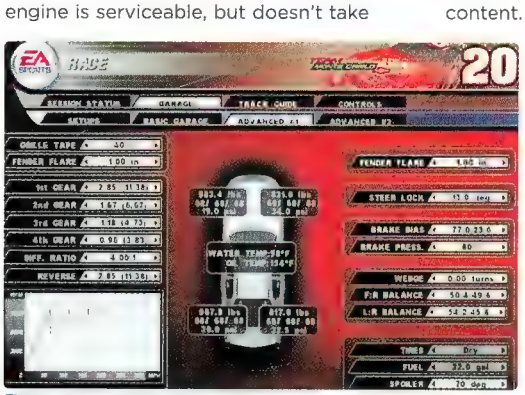
The in car view gives you a pretty good feel for actually being in a stock car.

Low octane

NASCAR Thunder also seems a bit light on content. Sure, all the requisite stuff is there—all the Winston Cup drivers and tracks, etc.—but there doesn't seem to be much in the way of creative game modes. Maybe most people don't want anything beyond the standard season and career modes, but scenarios might be nice, as would a good training mode that gave more driver feedback.

NASCAR Thunder's greatest appeal lies is in its sheer visceral quality. *Thunder* is an appropriate name, since the roar of the cars is so well rendered and relays the sheer power of these machines. But it's not just about impressive roars. Subtle engine and road sounds not only cue you to your car's condition, but also help to create the feeling of really sitting inside a 700 horsepower behemoth.

EA Sports would do well to give the PC version of *NASCAR Thunder* more special attention and really exploit the power of the platform with the next iteration. As it is, the game should be sufficient for 99.99 percent of all NASCAR fans who are racing on the PC, but some consideration should be given to the hardcore grognards. After all, they don't have a lot of other choices right now. **Tom Price**



Tweak away, gearheads.

NASCAR *Thunder*'s greatest appeal lies in its sheer visceral quality.

Verdict ★★★½☆

Not bad, but we expect more.

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** GENRE: **Action/Adventure** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB install, 64MB 3D card**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.2GHz, 128MB 3D card, dual analog gamepad** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

Have fun storming the castle

Fifteen years later, and you're still at it.

Another palace, another princess, another treacherous vizier. More mazelike levels to climb, jump, swing, and fight your way through. When the first game in the series came out in 1989, people were blown away by its lifelike animation because no other game offered anything comparable.

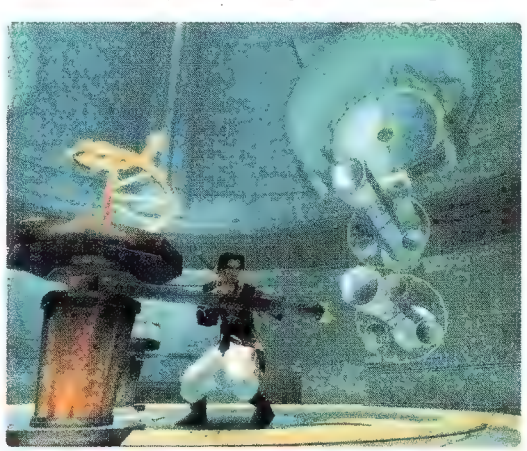
Today, of course, there are plenty of games that feature characters who look (more or less) like real people when they move. This poses a problem for designer Jordan Mechner and his nimble Arabian knight: Is fancy footwork enough to make *Prince of Persia* stand out in 2004?

Light on his feet

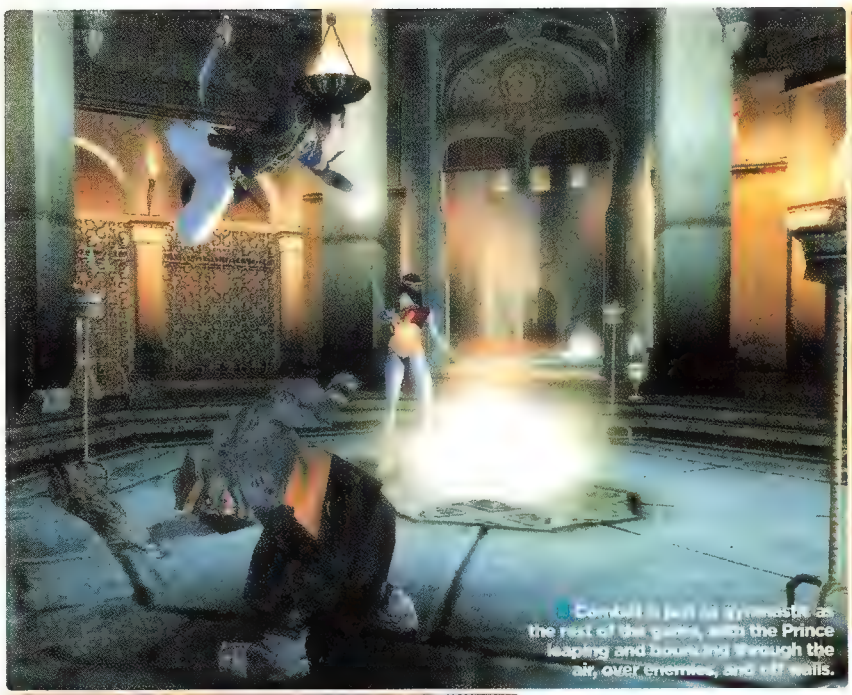
The short answer is yes. Particularly novel moves can still make a game memorable—consider the wall-crawling in *Spider-Man* or the split jump in *Splinter Cell*—and Mechner and his team at Ubisoft give us some doozies here. To cross a gap in the floor, the Prince can run perpendicularly along a neighboring wall. To reach a high platform, he can kick his way back and forth between two parallel walls like Jackie Chan. Run off a ledge and the Prince grabs desperately for the edge as he falls. In combat, he can cartwheel over an enemy's head and strike with his sword as he descends. It's great stuff.

The problem is the controls. Like too many current titles, *The Sands of Time* was designed principally as a console game, and some things that are smooth as silk in, for instance, the Xbox version are awkward here. Fighting half a dozen enemies as they surround you feels intuitive with a control pad, but not so much with WASD keys and the mouse. Worse, the complete control you have over camera angles on the Xbox is spotty and inconsistent on the PC. Too often you're stuck viewing the action from an obstructed angle that you can't rotate, and when you do have control, it's with an oversensitive mouse that makes the screen swing vertiginously at the slightest touch. Also, because the keyboard controls are based on relative rather than absolute orientation, you can find yourself moving in an

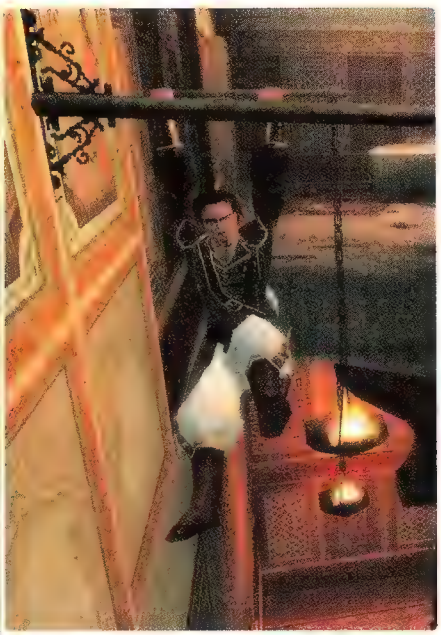
You'd think we'd have become jaded over the past 15 years...but you'd be wrong.



Large mechanical puzzles aren't this *Prince*'s best feature and serve to slow down the hypnotic action of the game.



Combat is just as gymnastic as the rest of the game, with the Prince leaping and bouncing through the air, over enemies, and off walls.



The game is at its very best when the Prince is running, leaping, or swinging through the massive, vertigo-inducing levels.

Powering up the time-shifting dagger with the magical sands of time.

unintended direction when the game switches camera angles for dramatic effect. For example, pressing A moves you to the left as long as you're facing away from the screen, but if the game suddenly switches to a side view, continuing to hold down the same key makes you walk forward instead.

Flipping the hourglass

These issues would be more annoying if it weren't for some of the special powers the game gives you. In the opening sequence, you steal a magic dagger and a giant hourglass from a maharajah. The maharajah's vizier tricks you into spilling the cursed sands contained in the hourglass, and you spend the rest of the game retrieving the sand, Dustbuster-fashion, with the dagger. Pick up enough sand and you can exploit certain time-related magic powers. You can shift enemies into slow motion or freeze them entirely. Even better, you can "rewind" time in 10-second chunks, allowing you to unmake mistakes and retry moves you didn't get right the first time. Since the game is saved only at level-end checkpoints—yet another sign that its heart is in console land—the rewind power, which can function as a sort of minisave, is extremely valuable.

The game is at its best when it poses an apparently impossible physical challenge, such as finding a path from the top of a ruined tower to the bottom. Combat is not its strong suit: Too many scenes just throw dozens of enemies at you one after another and won't let you proceed till you beat them all. The occasional *Myst*-style machinery manipulation puzzles don't add much, either.

But all is forgiven when you find yourself swinging gymnastically from flagpole to flagpole or running up the side of a wall and leaping, at the last instant, onto the side of a shattered column. You'd think we'd have become jaded over the past 15 years, that after all the well-animated action games we've played, playing yet another wouldn't affect us much. But you'd be wrong. *The Sands of Time* is not particularly innovative technically, and the PC version in particular has flaws—but Jordan Mechner still has the magic touch. **Charles Ardai**

Verdict ★★★★½

Thrilling acrobatic action, though the controls and camera angles could be better.

The Real Sands of Time

In some ways, the *Prince of Persia* games never change. But in other ways...well, just look at the difference in these combat screenshots from the original game and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. "[The Prince] runs, he creeps, he leaps and ducks, he hangs by his fingertips—and he looks like a real person doing it," I marveled in these pages a decade and a half ago. "[Jordan] Mechner has crafted the smoothest animation ever seen." Those comments go double today—*Sands of Time* is one of the best-animated games ever.

PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** DEVELOPER: **Totally Games** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 850, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, joystick/gamepad**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Secret Weapons Over Normandy

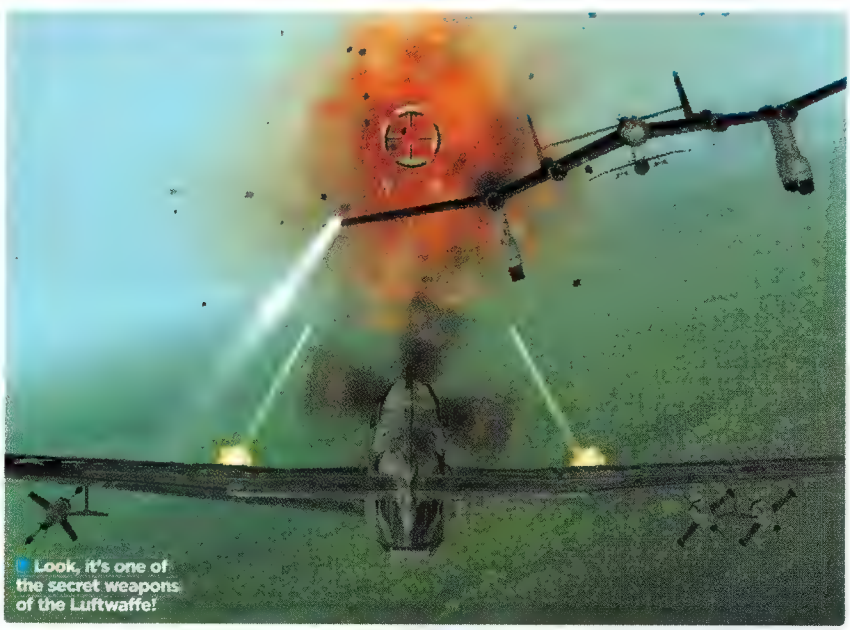
Tossing a classic franchise out the cockpit window

A pure action game without a hint of simulation, *Secret Weapons Over Normandy* has more in common with *X-Wing* than it does with developer Larry Holland's 1991 classic *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*. Well, actually, *X-Wing* was pretty realistic compared with this flight-action game. If you enjoyed *Crimson Skies* or the various *Jetfighter* games, read on. If your hobbies include flight-testing snap-roll response, just go ahead and turn the page.

The unfriendly skies

SWON zips you into the flight jacket of James Chase, an American pilot flying for the Royal Air Force. You'll follow his exploits from the Battle of Britain through the invasion of Normandy, with a detour to Midway in the Pacific Theater for good measure. Despite the historical settings, this game is in no way trying to re-create actual events—the writing is pulp action novel with extra cheese. You fly for a secret squadron called the Battlehawks versus Nemesis, an elite Nazi squadron of black-painted aircraft. Over the course of the game's 15 campaign missions, you'll progress from run-of-the-mill dogfights and ground-attack missions to destroying Nazi vengeance weapons, stealing enemy aircraft, and performing daring rescues of captured fighter pilots. The dialogue is corny and the situations unlikely—not that this can't be fun, but the lackluster plot can't compare to the engaging story line of *Crimson Skies*.

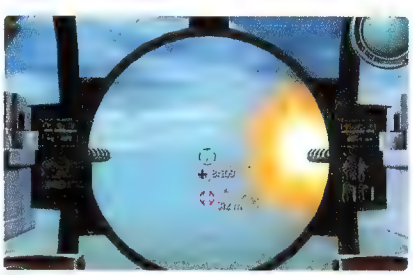
Successful completion of missions buys upgrades, which can be used to beef up your plane's performance and ammo. A series of optional challenge missions offers additional upgrades as rewards and unlocks planes (like the XP-55 Ascender) that aren't otherwise included as part of the campaign. There are more than 20 flyable aircraft, ranging from the Hawker Hurricane to experimental planes like the XP-56 Black Black Bullet. Instant action mode lets you practice in each plane.



Look, it's one of the secret weapons of the Luftwaffe!

Tailspin

You'll probably end up playing the first few missions a number of times because, despite the arcade emphasis, flying these planes is a bitch. By totally ignoring physics, the developers actually made the planes harder to fly than if they'd just created somewhat realistic but simplified handling. A host of other problems make combat tough: Planes handle differently when you're in the overhead "bombing" view, there's no in-cockpit view, the external views don't pan, and the target-lock functionality stinks—you may have to cycle through 15 targets before locking up the mission goal.



You'll take control of a ball turret or antiaircraft gun during some multisegment missions.

The low-polygon aircraft and sloppy textures seem to have been designed for PlayStation 2, and the console version's splitscreen play is AWOL here. The PC version includes a mission editor, but I'd be surprised to see much user-created content.

Secret Weapons Over Normandy is an accessible World War II combat game that's more *Baa Baa Black Sheep* than historical re-creation. But poor control, cheesy writing, and an anticlimactic ending will frustrate action gamers and make those who remember Holland's previous flight sims nostalgic for the originals. **Denny Atkin**

Despite the arcade emphasis, flying these planes is a bitch.

Verdict ★★½☆☆

If the combat didn't stink, it might have been cheesy, over-the-top fun.

PUBLISHER: **Dreamcatcher** DEVELOPER: **Galilea** GENRE: **RTS** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIREMENTS: **Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM, 700MB install, 32MB 3D card**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: **LAN or Internet (2-6 players)**

Pax Romana

A zesty Caesar without enough dressing

Hey, Caius, how about a bribe?

Wars, civil unrest, military reforms, and political upheaval wracked ancient Rome before the turn of the millennium. As it transformed from a glorious republic into an overbearing empire, Rome bested Carthage, Macedon, Syria, and Numidia, and in turn paid an incredible price for war. Soon, the political machinations of the great generals Marius and Sulla changed the auspices of Roman ascension forever. *Pax Romana* does a fantastic job re-creating all of this, albeit with a handful of problems.

There are two game modes to choose from: strategic and political. The strategic game is a matter of expanding the republic as Rome's absolute ruler in one of six historical-campaign scenarios, including the Punic and Gallic wars and conquering Parthia as Julius Caesar. You expand your empire by forming alliances and conquering neighboring kingdoms. With over 100 nations, 500 regions, 40 military units, and hundreds of randomly calculated historical events, expanding the empire demands your complete attention.

The political mode is where *Pax Romana* deftly mixes deep strategy and roleplaying elements. As leader of one of Rome's six political factions, your goal is to gain power while expanding the empire in one of several historically relevant scenarios. Victory means getting elected to Rome's Consul for Life. Power is gained through political connections at the senate (bribes work well), exploiting urban and rural commodities, or even hosting a circus (keeping the citizenry content is crucial). Victory is tabulated via an extensive list of personal performances and collective objectives. For instance, if one of your faction leaders gets assassinated or pirates attack a trade route, you lose points.

Pax Romana's scramble of menus, action panels, maps, and stratagems can be overwhelming, and little is gained from consulting the manual or the game's well-thought-out but bug-ridden tutorial. The game also contains a swarm of annoying if not fatal bugs and lackluster enemy A.I. Fortunately, neither completely stifles the overall experience of ruling an empire.

With more spit and polish, *Pax Romana* could have been a cornerstone strategy game detailing a great civilization. Still, it contains features any die-hard—and patient—historical strategy gamer can get excited about. **Raphael Liberatore**

Verdict ★★★☆☆
A decent primer for *Rome: Total War.*

PUBLISHER: **Matrix Games** DEVELOPER: **Freedom Games** GENRE: **RTS/War** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIREMENTS: **Pentium III 900, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 950MB install**
RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS: **Pentium III 900, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: **Internet, 2 players**

Eric Young's Squad Assault: Western Front

Another mess in the hedge groves

Fortifications provide little protection and often block lines of sight.

***Eric Young's Squad Assault: Western Front* is another of those small-developer, well-intentioned, but poorly executed games so full of annoyances, you wonder while you're slogging through it if you're** a beta tester.

A cross between *Close Combat* and *Combat Mission*, *Squad Assault* is a 3D real-time simulation of tactical WWII combat. Battles range from platoon combat to battalion affairs and can include armor, naval bombardments, air strikes, and artillery bombardments.

There are some improvements over *G.I. Combat*, *Squad Assault*'s unplayable predecessor, but one still wonders how the guys responsible for the *Close Combat* series can develop a game like this. While *CC* has a clean interface and a generally well-developed combat system, *Squad Assault* is clunky and full of idiosyncrasies. Squads, for example, insist on keeping some artificial formation, with some soldiers refusing to occupy fortifications or buildings. Instead they just hang out in the open with target signs painted on their chests.

Though it's expected that your troops won't always follow orders, *Squad Assault* troops have less sense than the commander of the Light Brigade. Your troops have zero fire discipline and waste their limited ammunition like they're in a John Woo movie.

Combat also feels weird. Long-range firefights are deadly, and infantry melts away within seconds of engagement, while melees can feature half a dozen attackers surrounding and bludgeoning a single defender for minutes without result. And the A.I. opponent is anemic on attack and thinks a good defense involves deploying all its troops in the open.

Unless you have a fetish for collecting every WWII game out there, stay away. **Denice Cook**

Your troops waste their limited ammunition like they're in a John Woo movie.

Verdict ★★☆☆☆
Better than *GI Combat*, like anchovies are better than lutefisk.

Tom Clancy's

SPLINTER CELL

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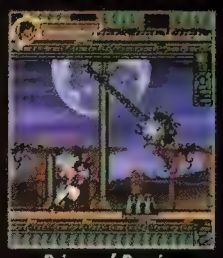
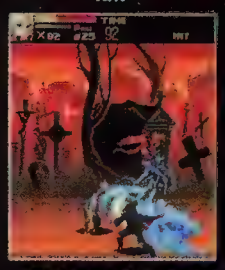


Prince of Persia The Sands of Time™

XIII



Nightmare Creatures™

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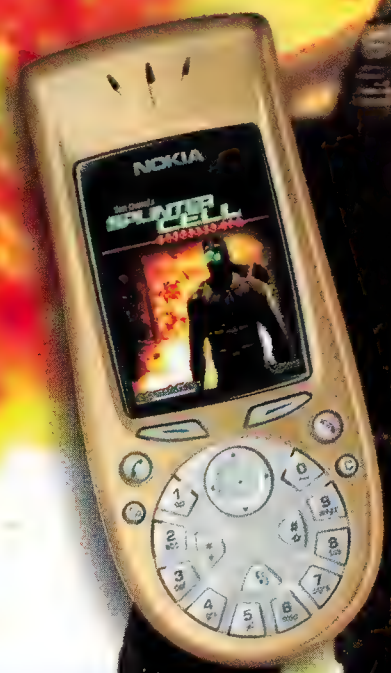

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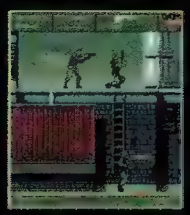

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WIRELESS GAMING REVIEW

A SPECIAL EDITORIAL SUPPLEMENT

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FEATURE

NWN MOBILE PREVIEW

THE BEST RPG EVER IS COMING TO MOBILE

ALSO PREVIEWED

NINJA GAIDEN

FROM TECMO

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

PRINCE OF PERSIA

SIGH...
PHONES IN JAPAN

WIRELESS GAMING REVIEW

PREVIEW

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

DEVELOPER: FLOODGATE PUBLISHER: JAMDAT MOBILE

For many of us nerds, the first useful thing we could get a computer to do was roll saving throws in *Dungeons & Dragons*. BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights* garnered rave reviews and huge sales by taking that notion to the highest level.

In early 2004, JAMDAT and Floodgate will bring *Neverwinter Nights* to mobile phones, but it won't be the same as the PC version, let alone the pen-and-paper game. It can't be. It took PCs almost 30 years to properly represent *AD&D* electronically. But when this *NWN* comes out, it's going to revolutionize mobile RPGs.

We played betas of the game on an LG VX6000 and a Motorola MPx200 Smartphone. Both phones sport impressive graphics for their hardware, but it's hard to look at anything else once you savor the Moto's isometric perspective and detailed textures. If you are serious about mobile games, your next phone should run a Microsoft OS.

Before you play *NWN*, you've got to create a character. In the mobile version, your choices are drawn from *AD&D 3.0* rules, and there are seven races and seven classes (barbarian, cleric, fighter, monk, paladin, rogue, and sorcerer). Character portraits and background music are pulled from (or heavily influenced by) BioWare's *NWN* game, and both add nice touches to the game.

But the story is the main thing. The members of the Floodgate and JAMDAT teams are longtime *AD&D* players (and environmentalists), and *NWN*'s narrative arc shows it. In the game's first chapter, your adopted father charges you with finding the cause of a blight threatening the Circle Grove. It turns out that displaced dwarves and their metallurgy are causing the blight, but they'll stop polluting if you complete several quests. These missions are nicely varied, and the characters you encounter along the way set a new

standard for mobile adventuring.

Not all of the standard RPG problems are fixed, however. There are (and perhaps always will be) too many repetitious conversations with NPCs. There are scores of buildings to visit across dozens of towns in mobile *NWN*, but there's little variation beyond the "buy/sell" or "sleep here" options. It would have been nice to see more of the racial/alignment effects that appear in the PC version get translated to the mobile game.

But these are minor points more associated with the RPG genre itself than this particular implementation. The version we played was only 80 percent complete, and the team is working on several improvements. Moreover, the architecture of the mobile platform makes adding new modules to *NWN* possible. Although JAMDAT has not committed to expanding the series beyond the three missions included in the download, the framework for doing so is built into the game engine. If all goes well, you might be playing *NWN* on mobile for as long as you've been playing it on your PC.

- MATTHEW BELLOWS

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- **Worms World Party** by THQ

98 The future is unevenly distributed—DoCoMo's **FOMA Fujitsu F900i** phone

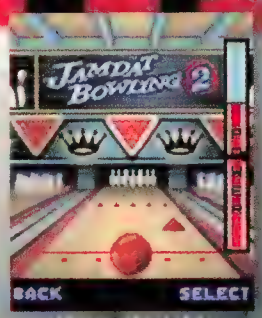
ABOUT THIS SECTION

CONTRIBUTORS

"Convincing physics, beautiful interface, head-to-head competitions — Bowling 2 is a huge step forward." — wgamer.com

JAMDAT BOWLING 2

The original had over two million downloads— JAMDAT Bowling 2 is twice as good. If you've never played a wireless game, this is the place to start.



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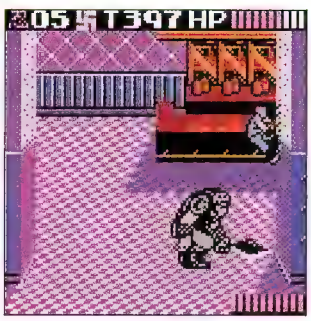
WIRELESS GAMING REVIEW

PREVIEW

NINJA GAIDEN CHAPTER 1: DESTINY

DEVELOPER: TECMO PUBLISHER: TECMO



MOST ANTICIPATED MOBILE GAME
FROM A WGAMER.COM READER POLL

Ninja Gaiden: 34.29%
Call of Duty: 20.95%
Neverwinter Nights: 21.90%
Pathway to Glory: 7.62%
Snowboard Tycoon: 4.76%
Other: 10.48%

Ninjas and videogames were made for one another. Their torrid affair has now lasted almost two decades—it's not just a summer thing. Soon, on your phone, you'll be able to replay their honeymoon. Don't think you'll be relaxing on Caribbean beaches, though. This postnuptial outing features none other than Ryu Hayabusa, aka "The Super Ninja," kicking the pixelated snot out of hordes of hapless, anonymous henchmen. Yes, that's right: *Ninja Gaiden*, the seminal NES classic, has gone mobile, and the result is shaping up to be a solid port that captures the fun, frenetic swordplay of the original.

For series veterans, there's nothing new here. The upswing of that is the fact that *Ninja Gaiden* is almost a console-perfect port. You climb walls, slash baddies, and wreak havoc with ninjitsu magic across five levels and against nine enemies. The graphics and sound (on our J-Phone preview version, at least) seem on par with the NES version that so entranced us all.

My concerns for the U.S. release are twofold. First, the Japanese version I previewed has some control issues. The keypad is not always responsive enough to change Ryu's direction on the fly (for example, hitting a guy to your left, then throwing a ninja star at a baddy on your right). And this is the kind of game that really makes control issues stand out. Second, the handsets that Tecmo is porting to are not up to Japanese standards. I shudder with fear at the AV quality loss, which could result from the port to our generally inferior phones. Tune into *WGR* to see how the Stateside release shapes up. - AVERY SCORE

http://wgamer.com/game-3103

REVIEW

ACE YETI TRAPPER

DEVELOPER: SUPER HAPPY FUN FUN **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI **AVAILABLE ON:** SPRINT

The *Ace Yeti Trapper* concept is simple: World-famous explorer Jack Bivouac has decided to try his yeti-finding skills in Nepal, the ultimate alpine arena. To get his shot at the Big Y, Jack must first practice his trapping skills on lesser beasts, outwitting them and leading them into traps through a variety of mazelike levels.

Jack maneuvers around each rock-strewn level with a nicely animated aplomb, swinging his arms like a manic Mario and laying traps with abandon. *AYT* runs smoothly, with no hiccuping or slowdown even on a crowded level. The control scheme takes a little getting used to, especially the trap-laying command. It takes a whopping four button presses to set and prime a trap, and an additional four button presses to airlift a trapped creature off the level, so you'd better hope your keypad has a durable "5" button.

In summary, *AYT* isn't a fancy game, but it's addictive in an obsessive, *Dig Dug*–like fashion. Because trap-setting takes time, forethought is a must on the more advanced levels, which increase creature speed and maze difficulty. Before long, you'll find yourself muttering epithets at yaks and yetis alike, garnering the extra bonus of increased breathing room on public transportation. - STEPHEN PALLEY

http://wgamer.com/game-2725

WGAMER RATING:

REVIEW: PRINCE OF PERSIA

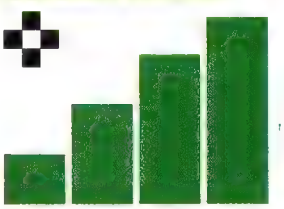
DEVELOPER: GAMELOFT PUBLISHER: GAMELOFT
AVAILABLE ON: VERIZON

It's tough to find a more consistent mobile games publisher than Gameloft, and it's very tough indeed to find a better wireless action-adventure game than *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. From controls to graphics, the game plays like it belongs on the top shelf in the Game Boy Advance section.

Like the previous *POPs*, *The Sands of Time* features a prince who has to climb, fence, and think his way out of a booby-trapped castle. The prince can find items that give him new techniques, such as short-term flight and forward rolls. The controls are crisp, despite the game utilizing nearly every button for an action. And while the fighting is fun, solving the game requires more brains than brawn. Extra details (like a code in the Verizon version, which unlocks a big-head version of the PC game) make *Sands of Time* a mobile masterpiece.

My only complaint is that, like most Gameloft titles, the game feels too short. However, hidden items and level rankings will probably encourage you to play through it many times over. Another triumph for the Gameloft team. - DAMON BROWN
http://wgamer.com/game-2911

WGAMER RATING:



REVIEW: WORMS WORLD PARTY

DEVELOPER: KILOO PUBLISHER: THQ
AVAILABLE ON: NOKIA SERIES 60 PHONES

I love *Worms*. Pitting those feisty, squishy little guys against each other, unleashing fiery and explosive death on their hapless brethren—what a joy. Unfortunately, the J2ME version from THQ is rather disappointing.

The basics of the *Worms* experience—fanciful destructible environments, an assortment of weapons and plaintive death cries—are there, if slightly pruned to fit on a phone. What is missing is the sense of nonstop fun that makes *Worms* such a great party game. It's surprisingly slow, and at times, it really starts to drag. The game's A.I. isn't very good, either, so you shouldn't have much trouble consistently beating it.

If I hadn't had such high hopes for *Worms* going mobile, I would have gotten a kick out of this one. But *Worms* should be a blast, and this is merely a thud. - CASHMAN ANDRUS
http://wgamer.com/game-1269

WGAMER RATING:

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WIRELESS GAMING REVIEW

THE FUTURE IS UNEVENLY DISTRIBUTED

· CASHMAN ANDRUS

YES, IT'S TRUE—JAPAN HAS MUCH COOLER GADGETS THAN WE DO. THESE DAYS, THE BIGGEST GAP IS IN PHONES, WITH JAPANESE CONSUMERS BUYING ONES THAT ARE EASILY 12 TO 18 MONTHS AHEAD OF WHAT WE GET HERE. SO, HERE'S A GLIMPSE OF YOUR FUTURE.

For more on this phone, check out http://wgamer.com/device-427

FOMA F900i by Fujitsu

SCREEN: These days, it's all about QVGA. That's 240x320 pixels, and some (not to those unless you're into a 2.2-inch screen, which makes everything look like it's part of a Fisher-Price toy.

GAMES: Whether you're looking for Sega, Namco, or a few others, some of the best developers in the world have games for you on a couple dozen Java sites or so. Some (mostly Sega) are free, but most are for the iMode version of your game.

COMPATIBILITY: NTT DoCoMo makes the kind of phone manufacturers dream about: They're cheap and plentiful to a very high degree of hyper-lightly-standardized. That means a game you buy for your friend's phone will almost certainly work on yours, and vice versa.

NETWORK: The 3G in your phone is DoCoMo's FOMA third-generation W-CDMA network. It supports download speeds of up to 384kbps, which is crazy fast. In fact, as a rule, you'll

FLASH: Do you have a need for speed that only pure Shockwave can satisfy? Then you're out of luck. Macromedia Flash doesn't work on this phone.

JAVA: With lots of onboard memory, there's plenty of room for rich graphics and complex sound. DoCoMo has its own version of Java, called i-Java, with added support for phone-specific stuff.

HORSEPOWER: Some models run Linux and others run Symbian. Either way, you've got a fully multitasking 32-bit OS, running on an ARM9 processor with more power than a high-end computer from five years ago.

MEMORY CARD: Memory Stick Duo or microSD card slots let you transfer games over, and turn your phone into the center of your digital world.

CAMERA: These phones come with 1- to 2-megapixel digital cameras built in, with support for movies and videoconferencing.

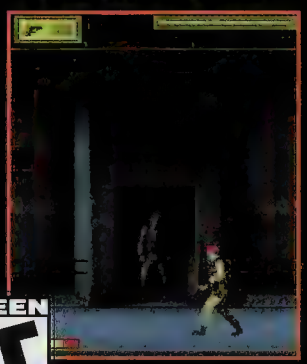
DESIGN: Since all the phones in a series have pretty much the same features, manufacturers use styling to appeal to different consumers. And they're not afraid of color, so chances are you'll find an red, pink, green, or blue one that's just your style. And a phone that fits you.

This is where the games begin.

RAYMAN 3

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Tom Clancy's SPLINTER CELL TEAM STEALTH ACTION



TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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MANUFACTURER iBuypower URL www.ibuypower.com PRICE $3,249

Where's the Kitchen Sink?

iBuypower's Gamer Extreme has everything you need, plus some stuff you don't

Inside

102 Flat Is Good
Is Hercules' latest LCD gaming capable? We take a look at the sleek-looking Prophetview.

108 How To...
Looking to squeeze more speed out of that machine? We show you how to tweak your BIOS.

110 Loyd's Top Picks of 2003!
Loyd Case gives the nod to the best hardware of 2003! See whose pocket he's in.

Buypower's PC-building philosophy seems to be one of getting its hands on the biggest cases it can find and cramming them full of a ton of gizmos and accessories.

That said, the Gamer Extreme is a great gaming rig. The Raidmax case sports a 420-watt power supply, but the heart of the machine is Intel's answer to AMD's Athlon 64 FX-51, the 3.2GHz Pentium 4 EE (Extreme Edition). The P4 EE's cache architecture is different from the non-EE P4's, but it still falls short of the kind of performance we've seen with the Athlon 64 FX-51. The Gamer Extreme uses Intel's D875PBZ motherboard, 1GB Dual Channel DDR400 PC-3200 memory, ATI's 256MB Radeon 9800 XT, and dual 120GB hard drives in a 240GB RAID 0 configuration. These components come together to create a machine that delivered interesting performance during testing.

I tested the Gamer Extreme with both the 3DMark2003 and the latest version of Extremetech.com's 3DGameGauge at 1024x768, 1280x960 (where applicable), and 1600x1200 with 4x AA (antialiasing) and 8x AF (anisotropic filtering) turned on. 3DGameGauge is an average of framerates taken from several games. Because it came configured with the Pentium 4 EE processor and the Radeon 9800 XT graphics card, I expected the Gamer Extreme to perform worse than the Athlon 64 FX-51 and GeForce FX 5950 machine that iBuypower submitted to this year's Ultimate Gaming Machine (UGM) story (*CGW* #234). Surprisingly, the Gamer Extreme's numbers were nearly identical to those of the Athlon-based UGM machine. And the Gamer Extreme is more than a thousand dollars cheaper.

The Gamer Extreme scored 3303, 2497, and 1775 in 3DMark2003 at 1024x768, 1280x960, and 1600x1200, while the UGM machine scored 3302, 2431, and 1725, respectively. Furthermore, the Gamer Extreme bested the UGM rig in *Comanche 4* and the *Unreal Tournament 2003* Botmatch. The more expensive UGM submission beat the Gamer Extreme in *Serious Sam: TSE* and *Dungeon Siege*.

I like the Gamer Extreme's Raidmax case, though I'd prefer it if it weren't so packed with "goodies." I like the 6-in-1 media card reader/writer and the DVD-R/RW drive, but I could do without the floppy drive, DVD-ROM drive, SoundBlaster control panel, and CoolerMaster Volt meter. Of course, that's just me. Ultimately, though, the Gamer Extreme is a good machine that's stable and, compared with its UGM cousin, a bit more affordable. ⊠ **William O'Neal**

By the Numbers

MANUFACTURER/ MODEL	iBUYPOWER Gamer Extreme
PRICE	$3,249
OPERATING SYSTEM	Windows XP Professional Edition
PROCESSOR	Intel 3.2GHz Pentium 4 Extreme Edition
MEMORY	1GB Dual Channel DDR400 PC-3200
HARD DRIVE	2x S-ATA 120GB 7,200 rpm Hard Drive (Raid 0)
GRAPHICS PROCESSOR	256MB ATI Radeon 9800 XT
OPTICAL DRIVE	16x DVD-ROM Drive
OPTICAL DRIVE	Pioneer DVR-A06 DVD+/DVD-RW/CD-RW
DISPLAY	ViewSonic E90F+SB Ultra Br.te 19-inch
KEYBOARD/MOUSE	Logitech Cordless MX Duo Keyboard/Mouse
MISCELLANEOUS	Cooler Master Meter Display; 6-in-1 Media Card Reader
SPEAKERS	Logitech Z-680 5.1
3DMARK2003 PRO	2497 (1280x960); 4x AA, 8x AF

Regardless of how you look at it, the Gamer Extreme is a great rig.

Verdict ★★★★☆
A good machine with a ton of extras.

At nearly $550, Hercules' Prophetview 920 Pro DVI ain't cheap. Of course, that price tag scores you a great LCD that's easy on the eyes.

Manufacturer: **Hercules** URL: **www.hercules.com** Price: **$549.99**

Screen Saver

Hercules' newest LCD combines great looks with good gaming performance

Sleek and space-saving, LCDs make behemoth CRTs look like aged technology. But high prices have kept LCDs from being widely adopted by gamers. Hercules' 17-inch Prophetview 920 Pro DVI, though, is emblematic of newer LCDs that may well bring gamers into the flat-panel fold.

The 920 Pro DVI is 28 mm thin, and the base is easily removed so that the screen can be mounted on the wall. There are no inputs on the monitor itself; the attached video cable has a DVI plug, with a VGA adapter for videocards without DVI capability.

How does it perform?

In a word: superb. The numbers? Response time equals 20 ms. But factory specs can be deceiving. The real test is how the screen looks and performs in real life, and it's here that the 920 Pro excels. Colors are accurate and the picture is sharp and bright, the usable viewing angle is surprisingly wide (Hercules claims 170 degrees horizontal and 150 degrees vertical), and I didn't come across any stuck pixels.

The new "standard" in LCD response times (a measure of the white-to-black-to-white pixel change time—not necessarily an accurate indication of pixel speeds in changing other colors) is set at 16 ms, but this spec is not the final word in LCD gaming performance. That 20 ms response time is respectable, but the critical data is in actual gaming performance. We tested the monitor with a variety of games, including *Unreal*, *Castle Wolfenstein*, *Battlefield 1942*, *GTA: Vice City*, and *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004*. In all but *Unreal*, we saw no ghosting or trailing, and even in *Unreal*, what we saw was very small and didn't hinder play.

Boasting great looks and superb performance, the Prophetview 920 Pro DVI is a good choice for gamers looking to go flat. **Jeff Lackey**

Verdict ★★★★½

An LCD screen with a superb picture and performance that should please all but the most anal-retentive of gamers.

Wil Power

His monthly spew of filth

Once again, Wil fights the powers that be

When I'm not playing *Madden 2004*, harassing Kristen, or roaming the halls of Ziff Davis in search of things to keep me entertained, I hole up in my office and play with some of the extra hardware I get. Recently, I got my hands on one of those clear PC cases that Vicious used to build its UGM submission. I pulled out an Intel motherboard I had sitting around, along with an Antec True 480 power supply, and I built a pretty decent ATI All-in-Wonder 9800 Pro-based DVR (digital video recorder) system. Everything worked like a charm, with the exception that a clear case really highlights the (technical and aesthetic) importance of good, clean cabling.

This power supply has so many extra cables that I can't imagine what people could possibly have in their machines. Typically, when I build a machine, the only parts I include that need power are the DVD-multi drive (combination DVD-ROM and CD-RW), the single hard drive, the graphics card, and the case fans. In addition to the two power connectors that attach to the motherboard, this power supply has one of those old power connectors for old graphics cards, plus three extra power cables, each of which has three plugs on it. Other than the motherboard power connectors, I needed only one of the power cables with three plugs. The others just get in the way. What I'd like is a power supply that's more compatible with my specific needs. Is it too much to ask for a power supply that doesn't have a half-dozen extraneous cords coming out of it? Probably, but I'm spoiled.

What are people putting in their computers?

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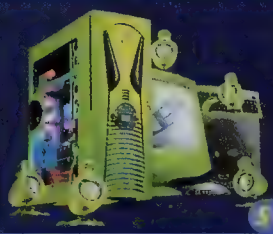

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Tech Medics

You've got questions, Wil is rapidly falling in love with "new mom"

The Vede settles in for a night of warm cocoa and Lifetime TV for women.

I'm not alone...sort of

Ever notice that both Wil and Greg Vederman from *PC Gamer* are hardware editors that readers love to make fun of?

Zack

Have I noticed that? Uh...yeah. I don't understand why people have a problem with me. At least I don't sleep in fuzzy pink pajamas.

The grass isn't always greener

Today I saw the promo stuff about the Radeon XT cards. It continued to talk in great length about how you really need a Radeon XT to get the full graphics out of *HL2*. I was just wondering how true you guys think this is (since I currently have a R9800 Pro 256MB). I get the feeling these new XT cards couldn't be that much better than my current card. Any thoughts?

Koen

They're better than your current card, but your current card kicks much ass and should be plenty powerful enough to play *Half-Life 2*.

Tricky Nvidia GeForce FX 5200s!

Is it worth $150 to buy a new GeForce FX 5200 that has 256MB of RAM instead of my current 128MB GeForce FX 5200? I don't wanna buy a whole new card unless it's worth $150 for 128MB more RAM.

Eric

I don't think so. If I had an extra $150 lying around, I'd pony up an additional $40 to get a 128MB Radeon 9600 XT.

Buy this graphics card

This month's graphics card of choice is the same as last month's: Everyone, go buy ATI's 256MB Radeon 9800 XT. I know you have an extra $500.

I hate Madden

I would like EVERYONE to know that I'm pissed. It's not enough that you can only strafe in one direction without using two hands (R to strafe, F to move right), but it is F---ING impossible to change the controls. Sure, you can change them in the Keyboard Only section with the mouse, but in the Mouse and Keyboard section, the mouse no longer affects anything—the Assign button is grey and you can no longer simply double-click to change it. Gee, *Madden* sure is fun when you can only move in one direction.

Arson

You're insane. *Madden 2004* is one of the best videogames ever. The key to that game is spending $20 on Logitech's Dual Action USB gamepad—it's essentially a PS2 controller, and the game was pretty much designed to be used with that controller.

Tablet gaming

Have you guys had a chance to try running games on a tablet PC? It seems like the active digitizer would make mouse-based games work with the pen, but I was wondering if it was actually usable. Do things like scrolling when the cursor is at the edge of the screen work? The first generation of tablet PCs might have been too underpowered for gaming (and they didn't have CD drives), but newer machines like the Acer C300 look like they might be good for armchair gaming. I'd love to see you guys write a short article on this subject.

Phil

I haven't tried to play games on a tablet PC, but beyond the input choices, I would guess that the graphics choices available in most tablet PCs would be the first hurdle. That Acer C300 and Gateway's tablet PC both use Intel Extreme Graphics—and as we all know, the only thing "extreme" about the Intel option is the frustration you'd feel trying to play a game on it. Even with a solution to the graphics card problem, what are you gonna do, hold the tablet in your left hand while you navigate through the game with the pen in your right hand?

ILLUSTRATION BY DARRYL KLUSKOWSKI

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How to...

Squeeze a little more power out of your BIOS

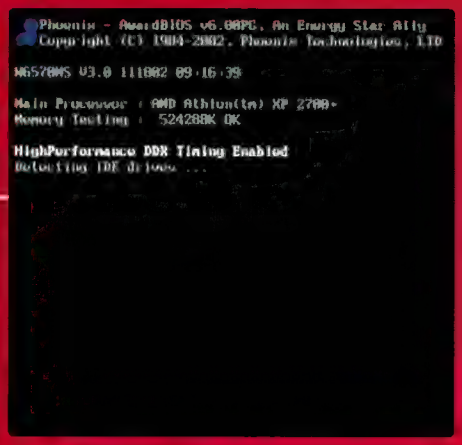
Joel Durham

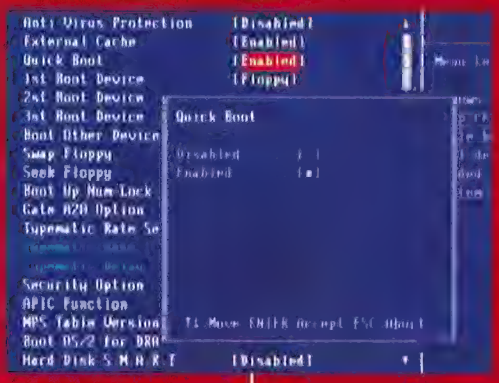
3D games are some of the most demanding software products, sucking up every bit of performance your PC has to give. One place to improve your system's performance is in the BIOS setup menu, where you can tweak various settings to squeeze more juice out of your machine. After changing each setting, boot up and run a current 3D title to test for system stability. If it crashes, return the setting to its original state.

STEP #1

Enter the setup menu

Shortly after you power up your PC, you'll see the POST screen (usually white letters on a black background). Watch the screen for instructions on how to "enter setup" or something similar. In most cases, you can hit the Delete key to enter the BIOS setup menu, although in some cases, you need to hit the F2 key or another function key.

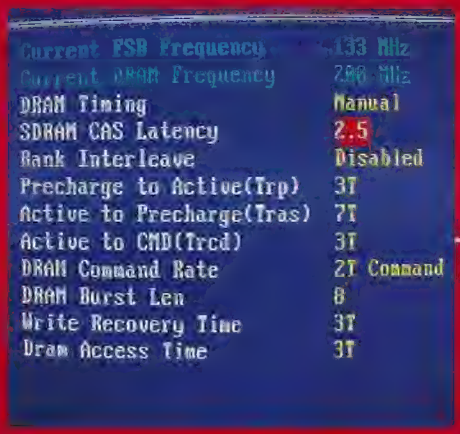

Phoenix - AwardBIOS v6.00PG, An Energy Star Ally
Copyright (C) 1984-2002, Phoenix Technologies, LTD
MS570MS V3.0 111002 09:16:39
Main Processor : AMD Athlon(tm) XP 2700+
Memory Testing : 524288K OK
HighPerformance DDR Timing Enabled
Detecting IDE drives ...



STEP #2

Speed bootup

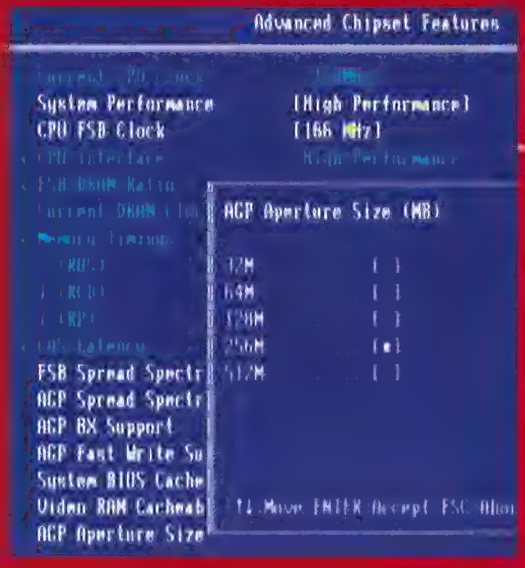
Leaf through your BIOS menu and find the page with an option labeled Quick POST or Quick Power On Self Test. Make sure it's enabled; this reduces the amount of time the PC takes to test itself before it loads your operating system. Next, find the page with bootup options and make sure your hard drive is the first boot device. You can always change this if you need to boot from a floppy or a CD-ROM.


Current FSB Frequency 133 MHz
Current DRAM Frequency 266 MHz
DRAM Timing Manual
SDRAM CAS Latency 2.5
Bank Interleave Disabled
Precharge to Active(Trp) 3T
Active to Precharge(Tras) 7T
Active to CMD(Trcd) 3T
DRAM Command Rate 2T Command
DRAM Burst Len 8
Write Recovery Time 3T
Dram Access Time 3T

STEP #3

Tweak memory settings

Find the page with memory settings like CAS Latency and DRAM Command Rate. Try lowering the CAS Latency to 2 and setting the DRAM Command Rate to 1. Turn off ECC, even if your memory is ECC compliant, and check for system stability.



STEP #4

AGP settings

Set the AGP aperture size to half of your system's main memory (e.g., if you have 256MB of RAM, set AGP aperture to 128MB). Make sure AGP fast write is enabled, and that the AGP mode is 4x (or 8x, depending on your card and motherboard).

STEP #5

Other odds and ends

Turn off any BIOS caching options and BIOS shadow options. Disable any built-in peripherals you're not using, such as an onboard LAN adapter, sound codec, or RAID controller. Make sure CPU L1 and L2 cache are both enabled.

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Loyd's

Cracked Case

Loyd names his hardware favorites of 2003

When Wil asked me to compile my top five hardware items of 2003, I thought it would be pretty hard to come up with enough different picks. But as I thought about it, the list got longer and longer, and I really had to trim it back. So don't think of this as a "best five," but as my favorite five hardware choices for the year: hardware that I, in fact, use on a daily or near-daily basis.

Athlon 64 FX-51

Nearly everything AMD said it would be, as a CPU for today's 3D game titles it's faster in most games than Intel's Pentium 4. The integrated memory controller and DDR400 support offers incredible memory efficiency and bandwidth. Certainly the folks who make specialized gaming systems believe the same, as we saw from the plethora of AMD-based systems in January's Ultimate Game Machine shootout.

Intel 865 and 875 chipsets

It may sound contradictory to nominate an Intel chipset as one of my favorites after talking up the Athlon 64. But Intel's primary desktop chipsets offer a stable, speedy platform for Intel's Pentium 4 processor. The 875P and 865PE are really the same core logic, bin-sorted for speed and latency.

These chipsets surprised industry watchers at the time with full support for DDR400 memory. The roadmap had specified DDR333 support, but Intel shifted gears and raised the clock rate of the Pentium 4's frontside bus to 200MHz (800MHz DDR), instead of the anticipated 167MHz. The result was higher memory bandwidth and substantially improved game performance at roughly the same clock rate. Toss in support for Serial ATA, USB 2.0, and AGP 8x, and these chipsets became the gold standards for core logic. And it has enough legs to become the chipset of choice for the first of Intel's next processors, codenamed Prescott.

ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 Pro

Sure, Nvidia and ATI have been exchanging blows over high-end desktop graphics processors like punch-drunk boxers, but in the Mobility 9600 (M10), mobile PC users wanting decent DirectX 9 performance now have a respectable GPU inside. With four pixel pipelines and four texture units, it's not quite equal to top desktop GPUs, but ATI's efficient architecture gives gamers who need mobility decent performance.

Logitech's MX900 Bluetooth Mouse is the perfect marriage of form and function.

Don't think of this as a "best five," but as my favorite five hardware choices for the year.

Logitech MX900 Bluetooth mouse

Sure, it's pricey. But it's got good range (up to 30 feet) and—more importantly for gaming—fast, precise response. Using Logitech's DSP-based MX engine, the MX900 is equal to any wired mouse for most gaming. If the MX900 is too pricey or too heavy for your tastes, the corded MX500 or MX310 offer all the precision and response of the MX900 in a tethered form factor.

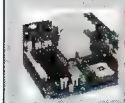
Shuttle XPC series

Shuttle proved you don't need a massive box to offer stunning PC performance. As each Shuttle XPC unit arrived on the scene with evolutionary improvements, these tiny, cube-shaped PCs became the darling of the LAN party set. Imitators have begun to flood the market, but Shuttle has steadily improved over time with two unique versions, including the only small form factor PC using the Intel 875P chipset for the Pentium 4, and the only Athlon 64 compact PC. **Loyd Case**

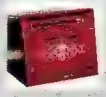
Loyd's Top Picks

Great games from the past years

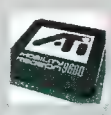
Athlon 64 FX-51
What does AMD have in store for us after the success of their Athlon 64 FX-51? Well, only time will tell. In the interim, the battle for processor dominance will continue.



Intel 865 and 875 Chipsets
With a ton of motherboard support, Intel's 865 and 875 chipsets are built to last. And when Prescott, their next big processor rev, ships, AMD may once again have a battle on their hands.



ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 Pro
While ATI's Mobility Radeon 9600 Pro (M10) may not be the sexiest look part in the world, the fact remains that it packs a serious punch. And not that mobile graphics upgrades are a reality, machines with these babies are even more compelling.



Shuttle XPC Series
Small form factor PCs are here to stay. And Voodoo's Shuttle-based rig is one of the best we've seen.

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PERIPHERALS

REWIND 100
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Inside

Money might not buy you happiness, but you can use it to buy lots of technological goodies and games. Money can also buy candy! We would love to review candy, but our doctor says it won't do anything to help our little attention-span problem. The Everlasting Gobstopper is a lie! TWO STARS! Sorry, what were we saying?

A-List

Our picks

CGW readers, let us know if there's anything we can do to tweak this list to bring it to full efficiency. More gadgets? A section that focuses on MP3 players? Condensing the items that rarely need updates for more space? After all, this is a list for the people! Plus, with the advent of the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, look for many more exciting items next month. One trend: More and more devices are getting it on behind the closed curtains of R&D departments. Cameras with phones, PDAs with MP3 players—what's next? We predict roller-skating computers and ducks with GPS tracking.

COMPUTERS

If there were no computers, the world would be somewhat boring. We'd be outside exercising. Or reading *Cow Grazing World*.

Intel-based system

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Dimension XPS** $3,126 Dell Computers	How long has it been since you've heard that stoned guy on television say, "Duuude, you're getting a Dell?" Probably a while, since that guy got arrested for possession. Nonetheless, the Dimension XPS is still one smoking machine.
BUDGET PICK **Area 51 Performance** $1,587 Alienware	**Johnny Liu says, "When I was five, I saw my dad's wig holder on a desk. It was kind of dark, and I thought it was an alien head, so I screamed." Imagine the therapy he'd need if he saw one of Alienware's sexy—but value-minded—new rigs.**

AMD-based system

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **PC 51** $5,000 VoodooPC	VoodooPC's F1 fought its way to the top of Wil's Ultimate Gaming Machine roundup (*CGW*, #234). It's an expensive machine, but well worth the coin if you want the power of an overclocked Athlon 64 FX-51 and a GeForce FX 5950.
BUDGET PICK **Assassin SE** $1,879 Vicious PC	**Get the most bang for your buck with the killer Assassin. An excellent combination of powerful and more budget-minded components makes this one as lethal as a hunger-stricken badger with a bad attitude (aka Ryan Scott, the Animal).**

LAN-boy rig

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Doll** $2,500 VoodooPC	At your next LAN party, swiftly carry in a light and manageable Voodoo Doll with an Athlon 64 3200+ and a Radeon 9800 XT—or spend the entire time dead on the floor with back problems.
BUDGET PICK **FragBox** $995 Falcon Northwest	**Like the Voodoo Doll, Falcon's FragBox is another option for those of us whose LAN-party experiences have never included a masseuse. While it may not be as powerful as the Doll, its sub-$1,000 price tag is awesome.**

PERIPHERALS

When you buy a pretty, pretty dress, it just isn't complete unless you accessorize with the right jewelry and shoes, is it? Peripherals are like jewelry for computers. Work it, girl!

Speakers

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Logitech Z-5300** $200 Logitech	There once was a mommy speaker and a daddy speaker with two baby speakers they "reared," as well as a pet subwoofer they kept on the ground. Don't forget Grandpa, the center of the home. And the speaker family of Z-5300 rocked the house!
MIDRANGE PICK **I-Trigue L3500 2.1 system** $100 Creative Labs	**Not everyone needs five channels of discrete audio. Creative's awesome 2.1 setup boasts excellent sound, as well as a wired remote that attaches directly to the company's MuVo line of USB MP3 players.**
BUDGET PICK **Logitech X-620** $80 Logitech	The last speaker family in this engrossing tale was a full family of six and one sub. While they were a rather frugal family, they still knew how to make sweet noise, playing at bar mitzvahs as The Amazing X-620s.

Keyboard

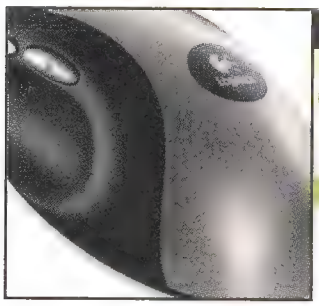
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
WIRED PICK **Elite Keyboard** $30 Logitech	Some things never change much. Case in point: a keyboard. Next year's keyboards will still be arranged in QWERTY fashion. And the Logitech Elite is still an excellent wired choice.
WIRELESS PICK **Wireless Desktop Elite Keyboard/Mouse** $80 Microsoft	**If you don't like QWERTY, there's the DVORAK standard. With a Microsoft Wireless Keyboard, you can repaint all those letters and avoid being held down by wires.**

Gamepad

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **Dual Action USB** $20 Logitech	If you're playing sports games on a PC, then this is the gamepad to use. Many EA Sports games default to this controller, which is essentially a PC version of the PS2 DualShock controller.

A-LIST PERIPHERALS

Mouse



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
WIRED PICK **MX 500 Optical** $45 Logitech	Remember the times when you routinely had to open up your mouse and pinch out the dust? Nowadays, turning over your mouse is like looking at a robot's genitals.
WIRELESS PICK **Wireless Intellimouse Explorer 2.0** $50 Microsoft	**Think about how nice it would be to hook up your PC to a big-screen television, snuggle into a comfy recliner with a table, and play your day away. Hence, the need for a good wireless mouse and keyboard.**

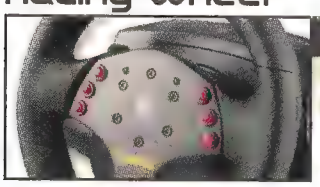
Headset

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **PC150** $70 Sennheiser	When the rest of the world gets too loud and confusing, hide away in your own little realm. All the mean old troubles of the universe won't be able to find you when you're wearing Sennheisers.

Joystick

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **Extreme 3D Pro** $35 Logitech	**Along with their flight-sim brethren, joysticks have dropped out of the public eye. While there are some wireless joysticks entering the market, the heavier weight of the Extreme 3D Pro suggests you accept the cord to save some money.**

Racing wheel



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **MOMO Racing** $100 Logitech	The entry-level MOMO wheel is an awesome peripheral—just the kind of thing to get your motor in gear for some *Need for Speed Underground*. Thus far, this one has been uncontested among wheels.

DISPLAYS

Displays are a good investment. Buy a good one and it'll last you through several system iterations; buy a crappy one and you'll need a better vision insurance plan.

CRT Monitor

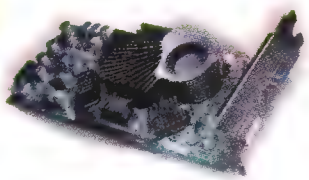
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **21-inch MultiSync FE2111SB** $600 NEC	If you never have to move and you've got a huge desk, a behemoth of a CRT is still the No. 1 choice for gaming. There's simply a better price-to-value ratio at this point across the board. This NEC model is a sweet choice.
BUDGET PICK **19-inch E90fb** $260 ViewSonic	**A 14-inch screen used to be the default entry-level monitor, but that's way too small for comfortable gaming. Thanks to technology evolution, 19-inch monitors—like this excellent offering from ViewSonic—have become far more affordable.**

LCD Monitor

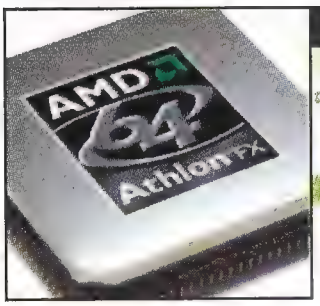
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **UltraSharp 2001FP** $900 Dell	The new Dell UltraSharp is the 20-inch LCD monitor that's packaged with Dell's XPS system. It has a slick design, and the response time is a quick 16 milliseconds, but CRTs still trump it in refresh rate and price.
BUDGET PICK **15-inch 152T** $360 Samsung	**LCDs are coming down in price. The 15-inch screen, while a little small for a fulfilling gaming session, runs on average $200 less than its 17-inch brethren, which is why Samsung's 152T is a standout compromise.**

COMPONENTS

Moore's Law predicts that every two years, the number of transistors per integrated circuit will double. Likewise, your wallet will continue to maintain a steady state of emptiness.

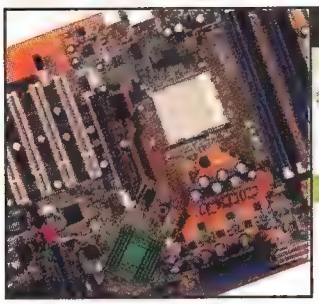


Processor



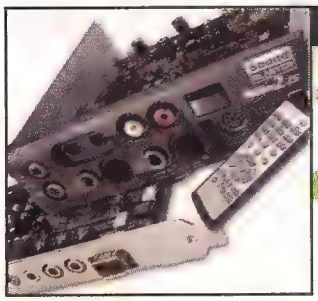
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Athlon 64 FX-51** $733 AMD	The Athlon 64 FX-51 is currently the top dog when it comes to gaming processors. Forget about its 64-bit pedigree: All we care about is the fact that it runs 32-bit applications—like *Max Payne 2*—superfast.
BUDGET PICK **Pentium 2.8GHz** $300 Intel	**If you're building a Pentium system, you can't go wrong with a 2.8GHz Pentium 4 processor. While not quite as badass as the 3.2GHz model, it's still more than capable of running any game coming your way in the next couple of years.**

Motherboard



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **SK8N nForce3** $225 Asus	Asus' SK8N nForce3 main board is the board of choice for the AMD Athlon 64 FX-51 processor. It has support for dual-channel DDR 400 memory, as well as SATA RAID. Of course, it also sports Nvidia's 6-channel audio.
BUDGET PICK **D875PBZ** $169 Intel	**Intel's D875PBZ isn't so much "low end" as it is flexible. Constructed around the i875P chipset, it has built-in SATA RAID support, and it makes a great backbone for an affordable Pentium 4 system.**

Soundcard



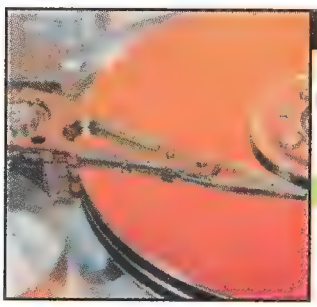
PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Audigy 2 7.1 Platinum** $250 Creative Labs	Remember when it was outrageous to have rear speakers for computer gaming? Times are a-changin—now, we've got the Creative Labs Audigy, a good match for the Gigaworks speaker set.
BUDGET PICK **Onboard audio** Free	**The most affordable option among soundcards is just to pick out a quality motherboard with built-in sound. All of the drivers will come with the motherboard, and the sound quality is fine for most ears.**

A-LIST COMPONENTS

Videocard

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Radeon 9800 XT** $400 ATI Technologies	The Radeon XT was originally supposed to come packaged with *Half-Life 2*. Unfortunately, the game's release date slipped, but many of these cards are still being packaged with a coupon for that eventual release.
MIDRANGE PICK **GeForce FX 5600 Ultra** $250 Nvidia	**Between cards that will blow out your bankbook and those that will quickly fall behind lie the midrange pleasers, like our recommended GeForce FX 5600, which balances smooth polygon throughput with your paycheck.**
BUDGET PICK **GeForce FX 5200 Ultra** $150 Nvidia	Graphics cards will quickly burn a hole through the ol' bankbook, so staying a generation behind is the smart budgeting solution. The Nvidia GeForce FX 5200 has good rates for the money, but don't buy the cheaper, non-Ultra version.

Hard drive



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **Cheetah 10K.6** $180 each Seagate Technology	The newest drives spin at a scorchingly fast 10,000 rpm. Install two of these babies in a RAID configuration for your own roadrunner-driven chariot. More than what you'll ever need for gaming, but also good for video editing.
BUDGET PICK **DiamondMax Plus 9 80GB** $80 Maxtor	**80GB drives at 7,200 rpm can easily be found for $1 a gig. Usually, they involve rebates with many finite instructions. We mailed in a rebate a day late and they wouldn't ante up our dough. Don't let the same thing happen to you.**

Optical drive

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **PlexCombo DVD/CD-RW drive** $60 Plextor	Prices on combo drives have significantly dropped with the incoming tide of DVD burners. Nowadays, finding a generic combo drive for around $50 isn't completely unheard of, but we're going to recommend the Plextor combo.
BUDGET PICK **DVD drive** $30 Lite On	**Instead of highlighting a combo drive, we chose a simple, cheap, and effective DVD drive. These things are really inexpensive now, so get one already, would ya? That way, you can enjoy our DVD special from two months ago.**

Case

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
TOWER PICK **TAC-T01-E1C** $150 Cooler Master	Cooler Master's TAC-T01 is big, heavy, and not necessarily cheap—but it's a great case for building that rig of your dreams. It's solid and shiny, and it has a metal monolith inset between the case's driver. What is that thing for, anyway?
ALTERNATE FORM PICK **SN85G4** $300 Shuttle	**It's not the size of your computer...and when you've got a slick little number like one of Shuttle's offerings, you're sure to get many oooohs and aaaahs. Make sure you get one with a big power supply—the girls love a big power supply.**

MOBILITY

Fluorescent lights will tan your skin to that perfect shade of pasty white. Maybe, just maybe, you should try going after something a little less Powder and a little more George Hamilton.

Laptop

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK **M675** $2,600 Gateway	With a 128MB ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10) graphics card and a 17-inch display, Gateway's M675 is doper than most desktop PCs.
BUDGET PICK **Dell Inspiron 5150** $2,000 Dell Computers	**Dell's Inspiron 5150 isn't the fastest gaming laptop around, but with its 64MB GeForce FX 5200 graphics card, you should be able to play any game that's out now. We played *Call of Duty* and *Max Payne 2* on it at 1024x768, and it worked like a charm.**
LIGHTWEIGHT PICK **Sony VAIO TR2A** $1,900 Sony	Now, this system might not be built with gaming in mind (it's got a 1GHz Centrino CPU under the hood), but this potent portable more than makes up for it in style. Weighing in at 3.1 pounds, this little baby is great for older games.

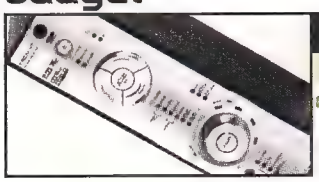
Phone

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
FLIP-PHONE PICK **SPH-A600** $350 Samsung	Of the current crop of camera phones, this one is the slickest, most game-friendly of the bunch (nice try, N-Gage!). Flip the screen around, and there's even a GBA-like dock for controlling the action better. Now if only there were good games....
NON-FLIP-PHONE PICK **Nokia 3660** $200 Nokia	**Thanks to the new federal policy that allows you to keep your phone number, negotiating and pinning down a really good deal on a phone is much easier. For a normal-sized phone, this model has worked great during the last few months.**

PDA

PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
PALM OS PICK **Zodiac 2** $400 Tapwave	For the moment, you aren't gonna find another PDA with this kind of juice for the price that Tapwave is asking. With it, you can bust out some grinds in *Tony Hawk*, juggle your contact manager (yay!), listen to music, and watch *The Simpsons*.
POCKETPC OS PICK **Toshiba e805** $300 Dell Computer	**This PDA sits at the top of Toshiba's food chain. It's built especially for the power-hungry PocketPC user, and its bells and whistles far surpass the 400MHz processor and 128MB of free RAM. What better way to run MAME and countless games?**

Gadget



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
OUR PICK **Creative Decoder DDTS-100** $100 Creative	The Decoder translates into diversity for your computer and console systems. Coupled with any computer speakers equipped with mini-jack outputs, it'll provide every imaginable input you need, from basic analog to optical digital.

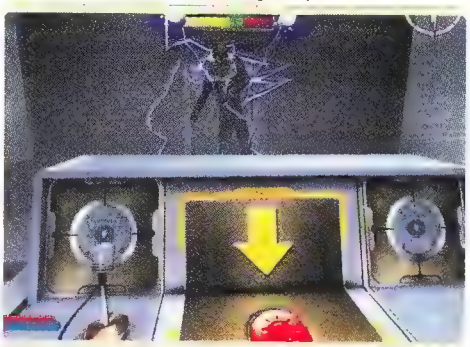
Rewind 100

What should you play today? Names in red indicate Editor's Choice games

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Age of Mythology: The Titans Expansion	1/04	More bells, more whistles, same game	★★★½☆
Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic	11/03	A great strategy game that's worth purchasing for the random-map generator alone	★★★★½
American Conquest: Fight Back	1/04	Fight boredom and micromanagement by avoiding this lame stand-alone expansion	★★☆☆☆
AquaNox 2: Revelation	12/03	Like drowning in a sea of boredom	★☆☆☆☆
Bandits: Phoenix Rising	8/03	A fun first-person shooter dressed up in a third-person racing game's clothes	★★★½☆
Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of World War II	12/03	The last bit of fuel injection for the aging *Battlefield* engine is worth the money	★★★★½
Big Mutha Truckers	9/03	This big-rig game is better than it has any right to be	★★★☆☆
The Black Mirror	2/04	*The Black Mirror*'s gothic horror doesn't require much reflection	★★☆☆☆
Blitzkrieg	8/03	A sturdy meat-and-taters real-time war game that even manages a bit of realism	★★★½☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Broken Sword 3	2/04	Dragon flamboyantly breaks out of the box, but drags it around a little too much	★★★★☆
Call of Duty	1/04	*Call of Duty* is so good and so much fun that you'll undoubtedly wish it was longer	★★★★½
Celebrity Deathmatch	2/04	Save your money by just throwing beer cans at the television	★☆☆☆☆
Chariots of War	11/03	As dry and inviting as the Arabian Desert	★★☆☆☆
Chaser	1/04	A good-looking shooter that's only fun for the first few hours	★★☆☆☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Chrome	2/04	A stunning sci-fi-themed shooter that makes *Halo* look hollow	★★★★☆
Cold Zero: No Mercy	12/03	*Cold Zero*'s repetitive, depthless play leaves you cold	★★☆☆☆
Combat Command 2: Danger Forward	11/03	A great scenario editor can't lift this average grand-tactical war game above *Korsun Pocket*	★★★☆☆
Commandos 3	1/04	Maybe the toughest game ever—and not in a good way	★★☆☆☆



GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Contract J.A.C.K.	2/04	No franchise shines forever—*J.A.C.K.* is the first blemish on the *NOLF* series	★★☆☆☆
CSI: Crime Scene Investigation	8/03	Finally, a game for mentally challenged couch potatoes	★★☆☆☆
Dark Age of Camelot: Trials of Atlantis	2/04	Good expansion for veteran players, but not much for new players	★★★½☆
Dark Fall: The Journal	11/03	The only thing missing from this eerie game's box is a change of underwear	★★★★☆
Day of Defeat	8/03	A great squad-based game marred only by age	★★★★☆
Desert Storm III	2/04	At times engaging, but not quite all it can be	★★½☆☆
Disciples II: Guardians of the Light/Servants of the Dark	10/03	More cartoony goodness (and evil) at a bargain price	★★★½☆
Dominions II	2/04	The most gameplay of any 4X game available anywhere	★★★★½
Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna	2/04	Good stuff for fans of the original	★★★½☆
Empire of Magic	8/3	An odd duck of an RPG, *Empire of Magic* both entertains and annoys	★★★☆☆

Make with the ha-ha funny games

Sam and Max

predates *CGW* rating system

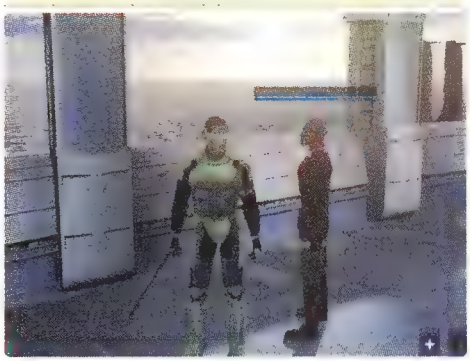
Recently, a man was arrested for impersonating a highway patrolman. He was caught pulling over an actual highway patrolman. Freelance police work in real life = bad. *Sam and Max* = good.

Anachronox

★★★★☆

Long overdue for more attention, *Anachronox* has an excellent story and console-style RPG gameplay. Unfortunately, it's been overshadowed by the studio's "other game," *Daikatana*.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Empires: Dawn of the Modern Age	2/04	A solid entry into the burgeoning historical real-time strategy subgenre	★★★★☆
Endless Ages	10/03	Something new in the massively multiplayer field that's worth a look	★★★☆☆
Enter the Matrix	8/03	Play it for the movie, don't play it for the play	★★½☆☆
Etherlords II	12/03	A better, cheaper 3D version of *Magic: The Gathering*	★★★½☆
Eve Online: The Second Genesis	9/03	We'd hate to see the first genesis of this MMO space game	★★☆☆☆
F/A-18 Operation Iraqi Freedom	11/03	Nothing really new here, but worth a look if you need a new sim for a slow system	★★½☆☆
F1 Challenge '99-'02	9/03	A must-buy for Formula One racing fans	★★★★½
FIFA 2004	2/04	It might be a rough console port, but it's still the best soccer game on any platform	★★★½☆
Final Fantasy XI	2/04	A rock-solid MMORPG from one of the most unlikely sources	★★★★☆
Freedom Fighters	1/04	Great teamplay tactics, but the PC version drew the short stick	★★★★☆
Ghost Master	11/03	This game is clever, stylish, and fun to watch, but it's a little too hard to control	★★★½☆
Gothic II	2/04	Better than the first, but still a little too wonky and foreign to be a classic	★★★★☆
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City	8/03	*CGW*'s 2002 Game of the Year gets '80s-style clothing in this sequel	★★★★★
Halo	11/03	Lost in translation	★★★½☆
Heaven & Hell	11/03	Witless, repetitive, and utterly devoid of interesting strategy elements	★☆☆☆☆
Heroes of Might and Magic IV: Winds of War	8/03	The degeneration continues	★★☆☆☆
Hidden & Dangerous 2	2/04	A really good game hampered by the same pesky bugs and problematic A.I. as the original	★★★½☆
Highway to the Reich	1/04	An excellent system gets better	★★★★☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Homeworld 2	12/03	It's no *Cataclysm*—it's not even *Homeworld*	★★½☆☆
Hoyle's Majestic Chess	12/03	A valiant attempt at chess for dummies that doesn't quite teach dummies—but does provide some decent chess	★★★½☆
Jetfighter V	2/04	A rare combination of frustration and boredom	★★☆☆☆
Korsun Pocket	9/03	It sounds like a microwaveable snack, but it's the best hex-based war game ever	★★★★★
			
KOTOR	2/04	A total masterpiece from BioWare. Easily the best RPG of the year, and possibly the best *Star Wars* game ever made	★★★★★
Legacy Online	10/03	A tedious exercise at best	★☆☆☆☆
Lionheart: Legacy of the Crusader	11/03	Unbalanced, tedious, buggy, and lacking in imagination—and those are its good points	★★☆☆☆
LOTR: ROTK	2/04	Check your brain at the door for this sword-swinging, spell-slinging good time	★★★★☆
Madden NFL 2004	11/03	Easily the best *Madden* game yet, but be prepared to buy a Logitech Dual Action controller	★★★★½

More of the funny

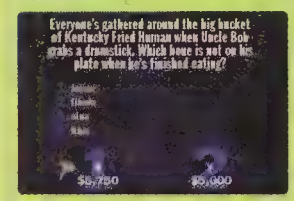
Ha ha, ho ho, hee hee

Space Quest series

The parody-laden adventures of former space janitor Roger Wilco turned the sci-fi genre on its side. Will the hapless hero ever return?

Day of the Tentacle

A giant purple tentacle bent on taking over the world decides to start his conquest in a little ol' mansion populated by weirdos.


Everyone's gathered around the big bucket of Kentucky Fried Human when Uncle Bob grabs a drumstick. Which bone is not on his plate when he's finished eating?
$5,780
$5,000

You Don't Know Jack series

The various *Jack* games are a series of irreverently funny pop-culture quiz shows. Now this is the *Jack* you should get to know.

Leisure Suit Larry series

predates *CGW* rating system

The leisure suit may be passing to a different Larry in Sierra's upcoming revival, but the originals' raunchy humor will always have a place in our hearts and funny bones.

No One Lives Forever

★★★★☆

One day, people will live forever, thanks to antiaging creams, cryogenic tubes, and endless numbers of clones in which you can swap your brain. Until then, play this sweetly funny game.

Cream of the crap

Like rich, velvety puke.

Postal

The first game ever to receive zero stars in a *CGW* review. For some reason, the makers of the game took that as a compliment.

Mistmare

Your future will be an endless fog of despair should you break the plastic seal of the cursed *Mistmare*.

Midnight Nowhere

Outright offensive, odious, and obtuse, the only place you should find this *Midnight Nowhere* is nowhere near you.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Massive Assault	1/04	Lemmings gone turn-based	
Max Payne 2	1/04	Improves upon nearly every facet but doesn't mess with the formula	★★★★½
Medal of Honor: Allied Assault—Breakthrough	12/03	Intense and usually satisfying, but barely good enough to justify the price	★★★☆☆
Medieval: Total War—Viking Invasion	8/03	This expansion is a must for *Total War* fans	★★★★½
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance	8/03	It's supposed to be *MGS2: The Director's Cut*, but the sloppy port makes it more like *MGS2: The Chimp Next Door's Cut*	★★★☆☆
Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004	10/03	The most fun you can have in a plane without guns	★★★★½
Midnight Club II	10/03	What it lacks in multiplayer, it more than makes up for in fun	★★★★☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Midnight Nowhere	2/04	Horrible horror with a zero for a hero	★☆☆☆☆
Mistmare	12/03	Just throw your $20 into the street instead	☆☆☆☆☆
Neighbors From Hell	1/04	A fun way to spend a single afternoon	★★★★☆
Neverwinter Nights: Shadows of Undrentide	9/03	A much better single-player game than the original game	★★★★☆
Nexagon: Deathmatch	11/03	Rock-paper-scissors is a more challenging strategy game	★★★★☆
NHL 2K4	1/04	The best NHL experience on virtual ice	★★★★★
No Man's Land	1/04	Another follow-the-numbers RTS	★★★☆☆
Nosferatu	2/04	Well, at least it sounds spooky	★★☆☆☆
Once Upon a Knight	2/04	A decent-enough RTS bogged down by a lame RPG and the mistaken belief that milk is funny	★★★☆☆
Patrician III	2/04	Little more than a glorified *Patrician II* patch	★★★☆☆
Pirates of the Caribbean	11/03	Two half-good games don't equal one good one	★★☆☆☆
PlanetSide	9/03	Humankind's first persistent-world MMO shooter is surprisingly good	★★★★☆
PlanetSide: Core Combat	2/04	A decent idea at its core, but not worth the price	★★½☆☆
Port Royale	8/03	After a slow start, a quality pirate game emerges	★★★★☆

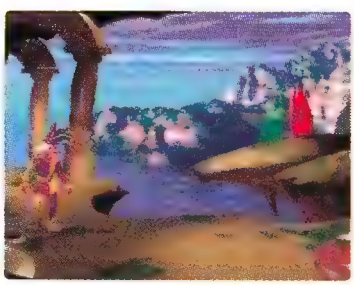
GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Railroad Tycoon 3	2/04	You don't have to love trains to enjoy the historical and economic challenges here—but a little train love won't hurt	★★★★½
Rebels Prison Escape	1/04	Go get a copy of *Commandos 2* instead	★★☆☆☆
Red Faction II	9/03	Edged out only by *Wolverine* as worst console port so far this year	★★☆☆☆
Republic: The Revolution	12/03	Good idea, bad game	★★★☆☆
Rise of Nations	8/03	The latest, greatest historical RTS	★★★★☆
RollerCoaster Tycoon 2: Wacky Worlds	8/03	Adds some window dressing and a smattering of new scenarios to a game well past its prime	★★½☆☆
Runaway: A Road Adventure	12/03	The bimbo of graphic-adventure games: both pretty and stupid	★★☆☆☆
Savage	1/04	A potential blockbuster marginalized by its own delivery	★★★½☆
Sim City 4: Rush Hour	1/04	The new focus on transportation adds substantially to an already excellent game experience	★★★★☆
Space Colony	1/04	A clever combination of real-time strategy and *The Sims* isn't clever enough to hold your interest for long	★★½☆☆
Star Fury	2/04	Open-ended and flexible without being too complex	★★★★☆
Star Trek: Elite Force II	9/03	Like playing one of the less-compelling TV episodes	★★★½☆
Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided	10/03	Might get a whole lot better	★★½☆☆
Starsky & Hutch	1/04	The bad rep of the '70s continues in this crappy game from a crappy license	★★☆☆☆
Temple	1/04	Yet another good game marred by bugs. Wheeee!	★★½☆☆

Just laughable

Contract J.A.C.K.

★★½☆☆

The black sheep of the *No One Lives Forever* family is saddled with repetitive shooting, and its attempts to be funny fall pathetically flat. Honestly, you don't want to know *J.A.C.K.*



The Legend of Kyrandia, Book 3: Malcolm's Revenge

not rated

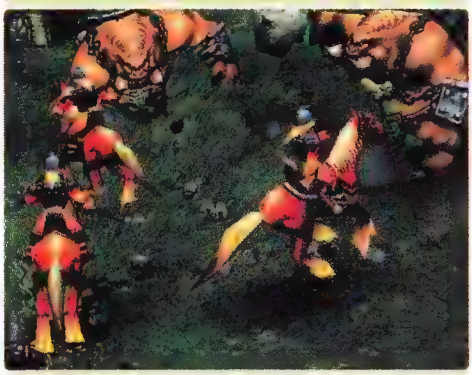
The third installment in the *Kyrandia* trilogy places fans in the role of the villainous jester. Nonsensical puzzles and dull humor make for highly uneven design.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
The Elder Scrolls III: Bloodmoon	9/03	This solid expansion effectively increases the landmass of *Morrowind* to exceed that of Earth	★★★★☆
The Great Escape	11/03	Not quite as bad as a month in the cooler, but not much better, either	★★☆☆☆

The Hobbit	2/04	Standard console fare, lightly Tolkien-flavored	★★☆☆☆
The Hulk	9/03	Best comic-book game—not named *Freedom Force*—you can buy	★★★★☆
The Omega Stone: Riddle of the Sphinx II	8/03	A puzzling archeological find that adventure gamers will dig	★★★☆☆

The Simpsons: Hit & Run	2/04	The best *GTA3* rip-off ever, and a must-have for *Simpsons* fans	★★★★★
The Sims: Makin' Magic	1/04	The final *Sims* expansion plays like a charm	★★★★☆
The Sims: Superstar	8/03	Another solid addition to the planet's best-selling game	★★★★☆
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004	12/03	A game that will please both hardcore golf-sim addicts and casual gamers	★★★★★
Titans of Steel	1/04	An old-school game with little crossover potential	★★★☆☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness	10/03	Not as bad as the movie—oh wait, yes it is	★½☆☆☆
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4	12/03	As long as you have a gamepad, it's the most fun you can have on a skateboard without putting yourself in the hospital	★★★★☆
Tron 2.0	10/03	Best movie-licensed game of the year so far	★★★★★
UFO: Aftermath	1/04	*UFO: Aftermath* is a good game that should have waited three weeks and one big patch longer to be released	★★★☆☆
Uplink: Hacker Elite	8/03	An intriguing premise and quality execution make *Uplink* a winner	★★★★☆
Uru	2/04	Some good puzzles, some bad action, no story, lots of familiar elements—maybe the eventual online content can make it more compelling	★★★☆☆



War of the Ring	2/04	Good use of Middle-earth elements in a sadly mundane RTS	★★★☆☆
WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne	9/03	Some nice new stuff, but you pay in micromanagement	★★★★☆
Warlords IV	1/04	A strangely joyless version of a classic strategy franchise	★★☆☆☆
Warrior Kings: Battles	12/03	Good game, but it's a warm glass of milk when what you really want is a shot of your favorite poison	★★★½☆
Will Rock	11/03	To quote a Twisted Sister classic: "We're not gonna take it!"	★★☆☆☆
World War II: Frontline Command	10/03	Bad interface, boring missions, and no realism, but the documentary footage is OK!	★★☆☆☆
X2: Wolverine's Revenge	9/03	Save your money and buy the *X-Men 2* DVD instead	★½☆☆☆
XIII	2/04	This Belgian import waffles between fun and frustration, excitement and tedium	★★★☆☆
Zero Hour	1/04	*C&C* better than it's ever been	★★★★☆

Lames of last year

The way-back machine

NightFire

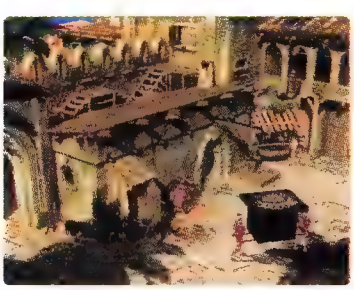
Well, Mish Moneypenny, thish ish a fine mesh I've got myshelf into. An utterly awful, horrible mesh.

G.I. Combat

Yo Joe, this game is a no go! A real American Zero! Combat any urge to search for this one.

Rock Manager

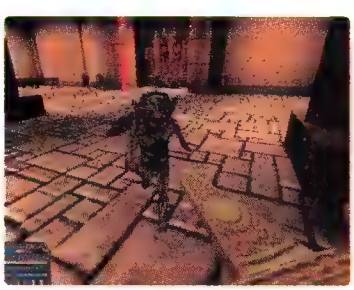
A game about taking care of a pet rock would be more fun than managing a band in *Rock Manager*.



Jazz and Faust

★☆☆☆☆

What kinds of parents are so inept, so bizarre as to name a child Jazz or Faust? Hippies? Morons? Hippie morons? Well, it just so happens that this blah game was made specifically for hippie morons.



Catechumen

not rated

God must be having a good chuckle over this attempt to create a Christian videogame that involves slaying demons. We don't care what religion you subscribe to—this game is sinfully bad.

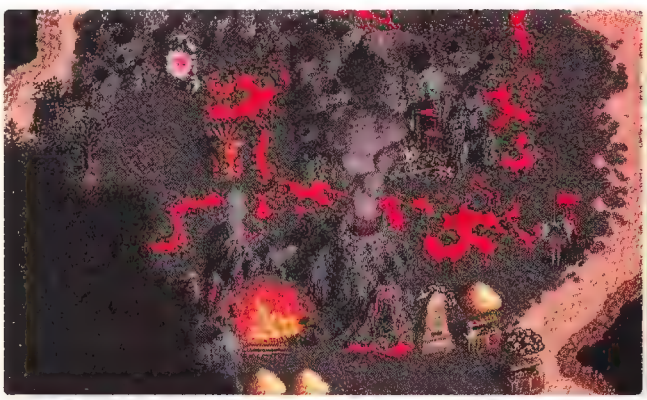
Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

PUBLISHER: **3DO** DEVELOPER: **New World Computing** GENRE: **Turn-based Strategy** ESRB RATING: **Not Available** REQUIRED: **Pentium 133MHz, 32MB RAM, at least 60MB free (but still, you should free up some space...), 2MB graphics memory, CD-ROM** RECOMMENDED: **Any computer you buy now should easily smoke the req's** MULTIPLAYER: **LAN, Internet**

Heroes of Might & Magic III

Take a trip back in time with Tom and Bruce



Happiness is being a warlock in a dungeon town and finding a sulfur stash.

Hmm, take seven free treasure chests or fight hellhounds for one gold....

Bruce and Tom fight it out in a two-player game using the Against the Dragons medium-sized map with the A.I. set to normal. Since there are no A.I. players, this only affects the independent creatures' strength.

Bruce: Until *Dominions 2* came along, *Heroes of Might and Magic III* was probably the best fantasy strategy game ever created. Unfortunately, it came out right as I was burning out from nearly two straight years of nonstop *HOMM2*. So, while I still played the new version a lot, it was nothing like the life-threatening obsession I had with the previous game.

> **I'm not retreating. I'm advancing in the opposite direction.**

Thus, I didn't actually learn every possible trick in the book. That's a roundabout way of saying I'm not an expert at this game and could possibly lose, so just a fair bit of warning there.

Tom: *Heroes of Might and Magic III*? The holiday shelves are brimming with games, and we're reaching back to play *Heroes of Might and Magic III*? For everyone reading, I'd like to make it clear that this was Bruce's idea. If it were up to me, we'd be playing *YARTS* (Yet Another Real-Time Strategy Game). You would all be regaled with stories of my superior peon management, how I set my footmen to defensive attitude while Bruce let all his little horsemen charge into their pikes for triple damage, or how I leveled up my glyph warrior by casting Inferno on Bruce's elven fop squad. Instead, I had to dig into my closet and find this game sitting between *Heavy Gear 2* and *Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine*.

Each turn is one day. Creatures increase in population at the end of each week.

Month 1, week 1, day 1

Tom: I start way up in the upper-left corner of the map with a rampart town. Ramparts are sort of like *HOMM2*'s sorceress towns, but with green dragons instead of phoenixes. My town is named Wise Oak, which sounds like a cross between a gated community and that sentient tree from the *Legend of Zelda* games.

Bruce: I'm in a dungeon town and start with a warlock. I'm also underground. I don't remember much about this map, except that I think one player starts aboveground and one below. This will give us plenty of time to gather our armies before we go head to head...unless I'm wrong and Tom is right next door in his own dungeon.

Month 1, week 1, day 5

Tom: I've hired three heroes to scout out the map. This is "Smooth Move, Dumb Ass" No. 1, since *HOMM* is all about closing off regions behind powerful monsters, effectively locking you out of certain areas until you've built up enough of an army to break through. Now, my heroes are running around bumping into each other, frantically looking for someplace that hasn't already been explored. I should have spent the money on bigger armies. There is nothing more frustrating than revealing a hoard of five treasure chests and three piles of gold, only to realize that the way is blocked by an army you probably won't be able to defeat for another three weeks.

Bruce: I had forgotten how annoying this game's underground can be. It's divided into several noncontiguous areas that can only be reached by going through teleportation portals called monoliths. However, it's not easy to see at a glance which one goes where, because you have to match monoliths by searching for two that have the same pattern in the door. It's like someone decided there still wasn't enough gameplay in the series, so they threw in a bonus minigame of *Concentration*. Also, some portals are only one-way, so once you go through them, you must find new portals to take you back via some other route. The net result is that my heroes keep getting lost in circles. I'm wasting a lot of movement points and Tom is probably winning.

Month 1, week 2, day 1

Tom: I have a druid named Coronius. After this game he will go on to invent a brand of Mexican beer. He has revealed a town close by, but I can't find a way to get to it because it's hemmed in by woods, and I can't find where the road comes out. This is moot anyway, since the town is guarded by a magi who would kick the ass of Coronius and his centaur/dwarf army. It is a tower town, which means I'll get titans once I grab it.

Bruce: No sign of any new towns yet, but I'm picking up lots of experience—Deemer the warlock is already up to level

Tom
Last month:
His prophet evangelized from his bloody pulpit in *Dominions 2*, though Tom just came out bloody.

Bruce
Last month:
Bruce proclaimed "Cthulhu f'tagn!" upon his victory. We have yet to figure out what it means.

5. Early in the game, I like to take experience points from the chests to get my heroes leveled up quickly and only take enough gold to allow me to build town-hall upgrades. The money invested early in revenue-generating structures pays off big later on when you're spending several weeks' worth of income just to get top-level recruits.

Month 1, week 3, day 2

Bruce: I just found a town called Ghostwind that looks like a necropolis. It's located a few monolith jumps away from my starting dungeon. It only lists some zombies as defenders, so Deemer takes a chance with some harpies and medusas and attacks. It's an easy victory that should ease my gold problems tremendously.

Month 1, week 3, day 7

Tom: No sign of Bruce yet. I'd think I'd have bumped into a scout or something by now, but there might be some sort of Shadow Land counterpart to this map.

Month 1, week 4, day 2

Bruce: I've explored about a third of the underground and have my capital in my dungeon town of Coldshadow generating 4,000 gold each turn. Next turn, my other town will be upgraded with a city hall, which is the highest it can go since you can only have one capital in the game at a time. I'll be earning 42,000 gold per week, which I can get up to 56,000 if I can find one more town and upgrade it. As much gold as that is, though, I'm sure it won't be enough.

Month 2, week 1, day 3

Tom: OK, I'm draining the land of goodies and monsters to fight, but my advancement seems to be stymied. Coronius is stuck at level 3, my battle mage Terek is at level 2, and I never have enough money to upgrade the structures in my town. "Smooth Move, Dumb Ass" No. 2 was forgetting to upgrade my city hall into a capital until now. That would have given me a serious income boost a while back. I really need to grab Tirith, the tower town. But

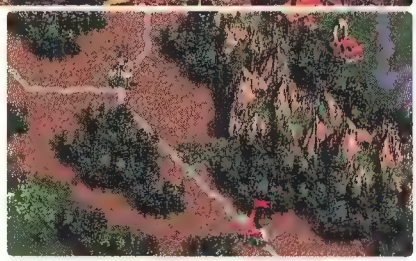
A fully upgraded Inferno town is a beautiful sight.

one of the trademarks of *HOMM* map design is that two locations that look like they're close to each other are actually separated by a long, mazey, twisty passage. To get to Tirith, I have to go all the way south from Wise Oak to an opening in the trees and then come all the way back up a road. This will make it hard for my one army to defend any cities if Bruce brings up a killer stack. And killer stacks are what this game is all about.

Bruce: I managed to find and capture the inferno town of Candent. Infernos are great because they generate devils, which are indispensable because of their teleportation power. An army full of black dragons (from the dungeon), ghost dragons (from the necropolis), and devils will be fearsomely fast and worth the morale hit you get for combining undead with other types of units. Unfortunately, it's going to take a while to build all the structures in Candent required for the devil-producing Forsaken Palace. (That actually sounds like a bad Chinese restaurant.)

Month 2, week 2, day 6

Tom: Terek takes Tirith! (I was hoping I'd get to write that.) I lost all my centaurs to Tirith's magi and stone golem defenders, but my pegasi and unicorns galloped to victory. Horse power, baby! Terek is becoming my main hero—he's up to level 9—and he's going to be pretty tough with a combination of Wise Oakian gold dragons and Tirithian titans. Unfortunately, I'm having cash-flow problems and can't



Two roads diverged in a magical wood / And Bruce took the one with Tom's hero on it / And got his ass rightfully kicked.

upgrade my Dragon Cliffs, so I'm kind of slumming it with green dragons.

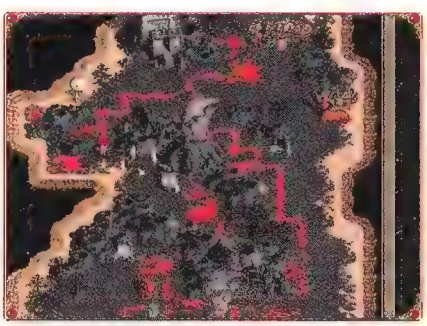
Month 2, week 3, day 7

Bruce: I have a new hero—Iona the alchemist. Her job is simply to run around and collect all the remaining treasure chests down here and exchange them for gold. There is no point in leveling another hero—my warlocks are going to have to fight the battles now. I'm almost ready to head topside and see if I can find Tom.

Month 2, week 4, day 3

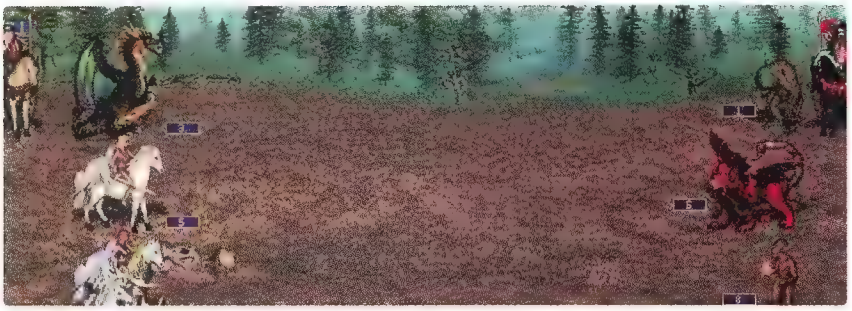
Tom: A-ha! A red dot on the strategic map! Bruce has decided to venture forth from whatever alternate dimension he's been hiding in. His little army only has a few black dragons. Coronius the beer druid is close enough to attack. In the tactical combat, I cast Dragon Slayer on my silver pegasi and watch as the little whinnying dudes team up with my green dragons to trounce Geryk. However, his hero escapes, shrieking like a girl the entire time. What a wuss.

Bruce: Ack, that was stupid. I should have hired a throwaway hero to do the scouting rather than my second-best warlock. Fortunately, my killer stack is close enough behind that I'm able to follow up on the next turn and defeat Tom's druid. I don't have a very good memory anymore, so it helps that we just fought last turn and I know exactly how many of each unit Tom has. I lose a few minotaurs and scorpicores, but my dragons all survive and I get some decent experience points out of it. Nevertheless, I'm going to head back



These magic transdimensional portals definitely need better road signage.

You might be surprised to hear that Expert Tactics hero skill helps a lot in tactical combat.



Dragons and unicorns and pega...oh, man, that's really lame.

to the safety of the underground and pick up some more units before I try this surface adventure again.

Month 2, week 4, day 4

Tom: I'm not retreating. I'm advancing in the opposite direction. And now I see where Bruce is emerging onto the map. There is some kind of stone death-temple thing in the far lower-right corner of the map. That must be the gate to his secret Gerykian underworld.

Month 2, week 4, day 5

Bruce: Tom isn't following me into the underground, so I wonder what he's planning. I have my warlocks (Deemer is level 12) heading up with a pair of strong armies. The risk in having two killer stacks is that a bigger stack might be able to take both of them out in the same turn. I'm going to have my alchemist scout this one out for me first.

Month 3, week 1, day 3

Tom: Bruce disappeared last week, apparently frightened away by my druids. I just found a third town. It's a castle type that was way down in the lower-left corner where I hadn't explored. However, even with war unicorns, green dragons, silver pegasi, and blue moons, my lowly first-level druid Adelaide (that's "Sweet Adelaide" to you) was unable to take it, thanks to some crusaders and their double strike. I'm sending another hero down there now with a bigger army, but I really should have had this town much earlier in the game. We'll call missing this town "Smooth Move, Dumb Ass" No. 3.

Month 3, week 1, day 6

Tom: Bruce's heroes have reappeared, but it's an inopportune time since my heroes are spread out across the map. I was taking advantage of the fact that units exchanged between heroes can freely move with the new hero even if the old hero has expended all his movement points. This allows you to chain heroes together to quickly ferry units across the map. I had just shuttled some giants from beer-druid Coronius to Tirith-taking Terek. Sweet Adelaide is in the lower left trying to take the castle town. And here comes Bruce, right up the middle.

Month 4, week 2, day 1

Bruce: Just following this road up from the south brought me to one of Tom's towns. It seemed pretty weakly defended so I took it. I hope to hang on long enough to upgrade it and get some titans out of the deal. I can upgrade my inferno to produce arch-devils, but they're far away and the battle is here, now. If this adventure goes sour, I expect I'll have plenty of opportunities to get those arch-devils later.

Tom: Bruce takes Tirith. Which doesn't sound anywhere near as snappy as "Terek takes Tirith." His black dragons made quick work of my giants and a throwaway hero I had recruited for defense. Coronius was on his way back, but he had no chance of winning the battle, and if he had lost in the castle, he would have been gone forever. My only hope is to redirect Sweet Adelaide, grab whatever creatures from Wise Oak that I can afford, and try to retake Tirith before Bruce starts cranking out titans. I can't let him dig in up here or I'm a goner.

Bruce takes Tirith. Which doesn't sound anywhere near as snappy as "Terek takes Tirith."

Month 4, week 2, day 2

Bruce: Upgrading another player's town deep in his territory is risky—if he retakes it this week, I just saved him 25,000 gold and 30 gems. If this map is balanced (three towns on each of the levels of the map), that means I have four towns to his two (or one) right now, and with that kind of income difference, he has no chance. I can get some titan recruits out of this, so I should be able to finish it here.

Month 4, week 2, day 7

Tom: Terek has mustered a bunch of green dragons, silver pegasi, and war unicorns, along with my one remaining titan and a few genies I shuttled out before Tirith fell. I don't think it will be enough, but I can't wait any longer.

Bruce: Tom attacked me with what I presume was his best stack. It was fairly close, although I ended up with four of my seven black dragons alive at the end. So I guess it wasn't that close. My other warlock is following up with a huge army of ghost dragons, dread knights, and vampire lords. Once the week cycles, I can grab some more titans and see what's next.

Month 4, week 3, day 1

Tom: It looks like Bruce has an even bigger army following up. I'm down to the town of Wise Oak and have no chance of capturing another one. I put in my request for an honorable surrender, and Bruce's terms are that I write the following sentence: "Bruce Geryk is truly a hero of might and magic." Tune in next month when we hopefully play something that won't cater to Bruce's predilection for all things elven.

Bruce finds the castle at the end of the road and knocks politely.

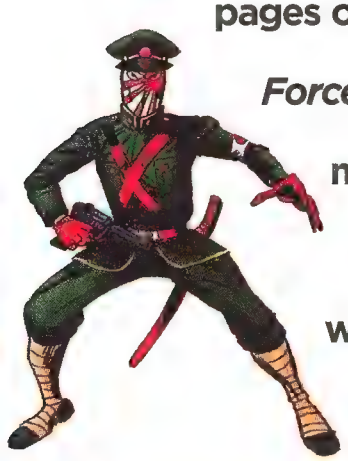
Tom's last stand has an appropriately snowy, Russian-front feel to it.

Coming Next Month...

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD April 2004 On sale March 2

Evildoers, beware!

The world's coolest superheroes are returning to the PC once again for a story ripped from the pages of the Golden Age! It's *Freedom Force vs The Third Reich* in Irrational's mega-sequel, and *CGW* has the scoop. Don't let the bad guys win—buy your copy in 30 days!



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I Love Games!

You didn't have to do it but you did, yes you did, and I thank you

I get lots and lots of mail and after it's X-rayed then defused by a crack team of experts, I'm always struck by the peculiar notion that many of you, gentle readers, think me some sort of curmudgeon. My stars! Well, I can assure you that we—and that includes me—at *CGW* are not the grumpy Bad News Bears of computer gaming, no matter how much Jeff Green resembles the reanimated, shambling, two-years-dead cadaver of Walter Matthau. No, beloved subscribers and newsstand shoplifters, we are undoubtedly the Steel Magnolias of gaming, a warmly clucking klatch dripping with the honeyed milk of love—for each other, for our little *CGW* family, for Darren's impeccable and uncanny but unnervingly Wookiee-caliber hirsute Shirley MacLaine drag, and especially for games. And no one here loves games more than me.

I wonder how they eat? Or make poopy? Such overwhelming self-sacrifice!

I love the incredible, immersive worlds created by today's games. Not 20 minutes into *Railroad Tycoon III* and I was whisked away to yesteryear aboard a steam engine chugging mightily across the plains of Texas, playing whist with sly cardsharps in the lounge, romancing Miss Bonnie Mae in the dining car, chortling with glee as I tossed freeloading hobos from the cattle car into the thorny arms of the majestic saguaros we passed. Lulled by the hypnotic clackety-clack of the rattlin' rails, I could practically see the sweeping prairie sunset as sleep o'ertook me...and my contact lens popped out. Alas, the discomfort of the lens springing from my bloodshot orb shattered the spell, and as I searched the worn industrial carpet beneath my desk, I was left to wonder, "Was it all a dream?" Well, of course it was! I had fallen sound asleep—just like I do on real trains! Genius!

But no less ingenious than the wondrous worlds created in games like *Contract J.A.C.K.*, where highly trained killers are so blinded by their need to destroy me that they refuse to allow their compatriots dropping dead around them from my sniper fire to disturb their vigilance. Not a ripple! What a marvelous magic it weaves! Yet it pales in comparison to the dedicated killers of *XIII*. So bent upon my destruction are these soldiers of evil that not only have they trained to the point that they absolutely never ever ever miss when they shoot, but they have also literally transcended earthly existence, opting for watchtowers to be constructed beneath their ever-watchful beings. How else to explain their posting atop towers with no ladders allowing them—or me—access to their lofty perch? Or their ammo? I wonder how they eat? Or make poopy? Such overwhelming self-sacrifice! To the programmer who created such dedicated enemies, I say a hearty, "Thank you!"

And thank you as well to all the war and strategy games that have taught me the important role that every unit plays in combat. Now, when we watch movies like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Braveheart*, or even *Lord of the Rings*, and my cherished spouse wonders aloud why you even need infantry, I can respond with a knowledgeable 17-minute dissertation detailing the crucial role that foot soldiers play in battle, to which she can only respond, "Why won't you just die in your sleep?"

I love knowledge, games impart knowledge, so I love games! Without *Age of Empires II*, I wouldn't know what a trebuchet is, much less that you don't pronounce it "tree bucket." Thanks to the *Civilization* games, I now know what the Adam Smith Trading Company is, or actually, I guess I know of the Adam Smith Trading Company. As far as actually knowing what it is and why it's a big deal, I only really know that it's a pretty good bonus to get in *Civ*. Still, almost nobody else knows what it is, so I can casually mention it at gala affairs and homey barbecues alike, cowing the rabble with my casual knowledge of something that sounds pretty important, marking myself as a Man in the Know. (Caveat to readers: Resist the temptation of casually remarking upon the Adam Smith Trading Company whilst in a holding cell, marking yourself as Future Man-Bride in the Bottom Bunk. You're going to have to trust me on this one.)

I love games because they have given me skills I never dreamed I would have. I've never played a straight flight sim, but my experiences in the *Wing Commander* and *X-Wing* games have made me honestly believe that I could take over the controls of an airliner, should the pilot, co-pilot, navigator, flight attendants, any licensed pilots among the passengers, and time-traveling super-apes from the future become suddenly incapacitated. The only downside to this is that I remain hypervigilant when I fly, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice instead of napping like I used to do. On the other hand, staying awake lets me work on my light operetta, *The Lusty Jest of Squeaky Fromme*.

My life and the lives of all around me are enriched immeasurably by the role of games in my life. I can ask a waiter for some "+5 salsa." I can almost forgive George Lucas for Episodes One and Two thanks to *Knights of the Old Republic*. I can repair sundials, telescopes, and any steam-driven machine because I have played *Myst*. And I have safely beheld the awesome terror of killer robotic frogs.

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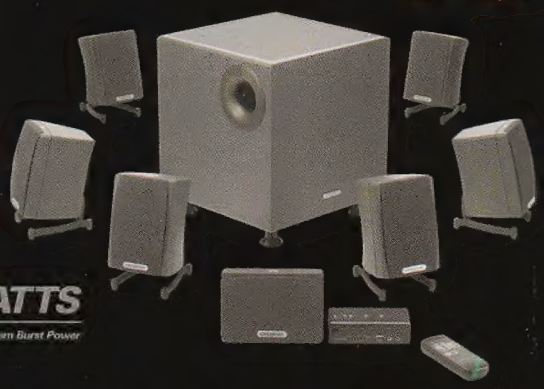

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